
Socio-economic Research and Intelligence Observatory



Final Executive Summary

Combined Universities in Cornwall Perceptions Study

March 2010

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Socio-economic Research and
Intelligence Observatory

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Executive Summary

Introduction

- ❖ Combined Universities in Cornwall (CUC), a partnership of six universities and colleges serving the county, aims to *'give more people the chance to study in Cornwall, and use university level education to help Cornish businesses and communities to thrive'*¹.
- ❖ Given the complexity of these aims, CUC engages with a range of different stakeholders across Cornwall including: local people; local businesses; gatekeepers²; business support partners; and key decision makers and influencers. CUC's communications with each of these stakeholder groups are tailored as appropriate to their information needs.
- ❖ In October 2009, CUC commissioned the Socio-economic Research and Intelligence Observatory (SERIO) at the University of Plymouth to conduct a stakeholder perceptions study. The research specifically aimed to identify the awareness and perceptions of CUC and, more broadly, higher education in Cornwall, within each of these five stakeholder groups.
- ❖ The findings from the research are presented in this final report.

Methods

- ❖ A survey methodology was adopted, which involved the design and administration of five separate surveys for each of the stakeholder groups as follows:
 - ❖ A street survey of 92 local people in St Austell and Truro;
 - ❖ An online survey of 100 businesses;
 - ❖ In-depth telephone interviews with 23 gatekeepers;
 - ❖ In-depth telephone interviews with 24 business support partner representatives; and,

¹ CUC, 2009, *The Little Yellow Book*. Redruth, CUC, p1.

² Gatekeepers include schools, colleges and organisations working with young people, and more specifically within the context of this fieldwork, staff members with a role in the provision of careers advice or the university/college application process itself.

- ❖ In-depth telephone interviews with 47 key decision makers and influencers.
- ❖ The fieldwork took place between October 2009 and February 2010.

Local People Street Survey: Key Findings

- ❖ Of the 92 local people surveyed, 78.3% were aware of the availability of university level education in Cornwall. Awareness of higher education was found to be higher amongst respondents who had studied for a degree and those aged 18-30 years.
- ❖ The respondents aware of university level education provision most commonly found out about it through a friend or family member who had studied at one of the available universities and colleges (36.1%, n=26) or through the local media (23.6%, n=17).
- ❖ Perceptions of university level education in Cornwall were also explored and found to be largely positive by respondents. For example, 97.8% of (n=90) respondents either slightly or strongly agreed that '*having the opportunity to study at university level in Cornwall is important for the county*'. Over 90% (n=83) agreed with the statement '*Government and EU money should continue to fund the expansion of university level education in Cornwall.*' A smaller majority (57.6%, n=53) agreed with the statement '*investing in university level education benefits me*'.
- ❖ Perhaps reflecting the high level of positivity with which university level education in Cornwall was viewed, an expansion of the existing provision was a common response when asked '*how would you like university level education to develop (if at all) in future*'. More specifically 28.3% (n=26) of respondents stated that there should be a broadening of, or improvement to, the existing provision.
- ❖ Awareness of CUC itself was slightly lower than that for university level education more broadly, with just over half of respondents (52.2%, n=48) stating that they were aware of it before completing the street survey.
- ❖ When these 48 respondents were asked what they thought CUC is and does, answers commonly overlapped and drew upon the concept of a collective or collaboration between universities and colleges. In relation to what CUC is, 54.2% (n=26) used such a description that ranged from a simple statement of the awareness of links between one or more university or college to a more complex definition of collaborations that centred upon the potential benefits of CUC. Perhaps reflecting this,

64.6% (n=31) stated that they were aware that CUC was a partnership when directly prompted.

- ❖ However, the majority of collective descriptions did not name specific universities or colleges and, where specific institutions were mentioned, they were generally limited to only two or three of CUC's partners. In addition, it was difficult to separate some respondents' interpretations of what they thought CUC is and does from that of its partners. That is, some respondents appeared to suggest that CUC itself was an education provider.
- ❖ All respondents were asked what benefits they thought CUC brought to the county, if any. The most frequently identified benefit was that CUC enabled local people to study within the county (52.2%, n=48). Related to this, was the perception that CUC would also attract potential students from outside Cornwall (9.8%, n=9) and increase the number of graduates who lived and worked in the region (4.3%, n=4). In doing so, some respondents (20.6%, n=19) felt that there would be benefits to the local economy through: increased business revenue; increased skill base; and job creation.
- ❖ In terms of the perceived disadvantages of CUC to the county, almost half of all respondents (47.8%, n=44) said '*none*'. Where disadvantages were identified they varied from respondent to respondent, and included: lack or inadequacy of the supporting infrastructure and transport (9.8%, n=9); the provision of inferior qualifications (4.3%, n=4); and the limited expertise available (4.3%, n=4).

Local People Street Survey: Summary

- ❖ It appears that there is a high level of awareness of the availability of higher education in Cornwall and of CUC, but awareness of CUC's structure and activities was more variable across the sample of local people.
- ❖ The available evidence suggests that university level education in Cornwall is viewed positively by the majority of the local people completing a street survey. That is, a large majority of respondents felt that having the opportunity to study at university education level in Cornwall is important for the county. Similarly, the majority of respondents agreed with the statement that UK Government and European funding should continue to be invested in its expansion. These findings are supported by the largely positive descriptions of the way in

which respondents would like to see university level education in Cornwall develop in the future.

Online Business Survey: Key Findings

- ❖ A total of 100 respondents representing businesses completed the online survey, covering a wide range of sectors, sizes and turnover.
- ❖ Awareness of CUC was slightly higher amongst the businesses than it was within the local people street survey, with 65% of business respondents stating that they heard of it before completing the survey.
- ❖ In exploring what CUC is and does, the descriptions given most frequently related to some form of collaborative working (38%). However, it was difficult to separate the distinctions made by some respondents between CUC and its partners in the provision of higher education. That is, over a quarter of respondents (27%) suggested that CUC itself offered education and/or qualifications directly. By comparison, 14% of respondents recognised that CUC offers access to education and/or qualifications through its partner members. A further 14% did not know what CUC does, or might do, and eight respondents chose not to answer the question.
- ❖ Awareness and perceptions of the services and facilities available for businesses from CUC partner universities and colleges was also explored in the online survey. Less than half of the respondents (44%) agreed with the statement '*I have a clear understanding of the types of services universities and colleges serving Cornwall can offer to businesses*'. Despite this, over two thirds of respondents (68%) agreed, either slightly or strongly with the statement '*universities and colleges serving Cornwall offer services that are of value to businesses*'. When asked if they had a clear understanding of how universities and colleges serving Cornwall could help their business specifically, 30% agreed and 41% disagreed.
- ❖ When asked an open ended question about the services and facilities available from universities and colleges serving Cornwall, 22% of respondents referred to the provision of skilled graduates or student/graduate placements and 19% to training. However, a relatively large proportion of respondents chose not to answer this question (26%) or simply stated '*don't know*' (15%).
- ❖ However, when respondents were prompted with a list of specific services and facilities available from CUC partners, 52% reported that they were aware of university level training and skills, 51% of student

placements and 47% of graduate placements. Where a respondent had accessed a service or facility, it was most commonly a business workshop or event.

- ❖ Respondents were asked if they would consider accessing services, facilities or activities from CUC partner universities/colleges in future. Almost three quarters (71%) of all respondents would consider using such services, facilities or activities in future. Of these respondents, 16% would definitely do so, whilst 55% possibly would. Business workshops and events (73.2%, n=71) emerged as the most frequently reported service that respondents would consider accessing in the future.

Online Business Survey: Summary

- ❖ Over half of all business respondents indicated that they were aware of CUC, with some demonstrating a detailed understanding of its structure and activities. However, it was again difficult to disentangle respondents' interpretations of CUC from that of its partners; over a quarter of respondents suggested that CUC itself provides education.
- ❖ Although less than half of respondents felt that they had a clear understanding of the types of services universities and colleges serving Cornwall can offer to businesses, a larger proportion recognised the potential value of their services to businesses. However, this did not necessarily translate into an understanding of how universities and colleges can help respondents' own business.
- ❖ Therefore, it appears that understanding of the services and facilities offered by higher education institutions are largely at the general level amongst businesses in Cornwall. As such, it appears that detailed information has yet to be either communicated or received by this stakeholder group. Perhaps as a result, only a small proportion of respondents had actually used a CUC partner's service or facility.

Gatekeeper Telephone Interviews: Key Findings

- ❖ A total of 23 interviews were conducted with respondents representing Schools (both with and without a Sixth Form), Colleges and the Connexions Service.
- ❖ When accessing information about the available universities, colleges and courses, respondents were found to most frequently refer to prospectuses (n=17); UCAS (n=14); and direct contact with institutions (n=8). All but one respondent stated that they engaged with some

institutions more than others when finding out about available offers. CUC partner universities and colleges were found to be the most frequently engaged with.

- ❖ A list of factors that may shape potential students' higher education choices was read out to all respondents. To provide insight into gatekeepers' perceptions of the importance of such factors, respondents were then asked to state how important they thought each was to potential students. The factors most commonly rated as 'very important' were: entry requirements (n=20); impressions gained from open days (n=20); and, the geographic location of the university or college (n=14).
- ❖ When asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about higher education in Cornwall:
 - ❖ All respondents agreed, either strongly or slightly, that *'higher education in Cornwall is becoming more accessible to the local population'*;
 - ❖ 16 respondents disagreed, either strongly or slightly, with the statement *'higher education in Cornwall is not of a good standard'*. The remaining seven respondents either did not know or expressed no opinion; and,
 - ❖ 18 respondents indicated that they would encourage potential students to study in Cornwall.
- ❖ The perceived advantages and disadvantages of studying in Cornwall were also explored in the telephone interviews. Almost all respondents mentioned the reduced costs of living or financial burdens of studying in Cornwall as a key advantage (n=20). A smaller number of respondents identified the quality of the education or local facilities (n=6) and the local environment (n=5) as advantages.
- ❖ In describing the perceived disadvantages of studying in Cornwall, two principle factors emerged: the loss of exposure to different experiences, cultures, people and locations (n=18), and the limited choice available (n=7).
- ❖ All respondents had heard of CUC before the date of the interview, 21 of whom had had some form of contact with them. In discussing the type of contact, it was clear that some respondents interpreted contact with one of CUC's partner colleges and universities as contact with CUC itself.

- ❖ The majority of respondents felt that they had a clear understanding of what CUC is and does (n=18 and 19 respectively). When asked to explain what actions CUC undertakes, responses included: '*reaching out to the wider business sector*', '*bids for more money*', '*put on information sessions for advisors*', '*working with colleges and schools to encourage a link between the two*' and '*promoting themselves and their graduates to the local businesses*'. For other respondents, it was difficult to identify clear examples of the type of the actions taken by CUC.
- ❖ All respondents were asked '*can you think of any achievements in relation to university level education in Cornwall that could not have been achieved without the involvement of CUC?*' A total of 15 respondents answered 'yes', six 'no', and two 'don't know'. Where respondents answered yes, they were asked to specify the achievements CUC had made possible. Again, the responses to this question were varied and included:
 - ❖ CUC's role in securing funding (four respondents, two of whom specifically referred to the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry);
 - ❖ The development of the Tremough Campus (four respondents): '*campus at Tremough has been enormous boost to county.*'
- ❖ All respondents were explicitly prompted for their awareness of CUC's achievement in securing £200 million pounds from the European Commission and UK Government to invest in higher education in Cornwall. Although only two respondents stated that they were aware of the value of this investment, eight stated that they were aware of the investment itself. Over half of all respondents (n=13), however, were not aware of the investment.
- ❖ Finally, all respondents were asked what they thought the priorities for university level education in Cornwall over the next five years were. The responses to this open ended question were, overall, varied, and drew upon the concepts of expansion, accessibility and promotion.

Gatekeeper Telephone Interviews: Summary

- ❖ All gatekeepers interviewed were aware of universities or colleges offering university level education in Cornwall and felt that it is becoming more accessible to the local population. All respondents were able to identify clear advantages for the local population choosing to study

locally, as such, the majority indicated that they would encourage potential students to study locally.

- ❖ Awareness of CUC was again high amongst this stakeholder group, yet similar difficulties were experienced in disentangling the understanding of what CUC is and does from that of its partners. It appears that the detail of CUC's structure and activities is not universally understood.

Business Support Partner Telephone Interviews: Key Findings

- ❖ A total of 24 business support partner telephone interviews were conducted with individuals involved in the provision of business support and advice at an operational level. This includes business advisors from publicly funded support agencies as well as accountants, financial advisors and solicitors.
- ❖ The majority of respondents (n=17) stated that they had previously worked with a university or college in the UK and this was most commonly with a CUC partner. Only two respondents reported working with institutions outside the South West, and an additional respondent stated that another branch of their organisation was engaged with a university in the north of England. It is also of interest that five respondents stated that CUC itself was a university or college that they had worked with.
- ❖ A majority of respondents were either very or quite satisfied with their experience of working with a university or college (n=11). However, four expressed no opinion in response to this question and one respondent was quite dissatisfied.
- ❖ A smaller number of respondents (n=16) were aware of the services or facilities that universities and colleges serving Cornwall can provide for businesses. Of these 16 respondents, just over half agreed with the statement '*I have a clear understanding of the services and facilities they can provide*' and 7 of these agreed with the statement '*universities and colleges serving Cornwall are having a beneficial impact on businesses in Cornwall.*'
- ❖ Of the 16 respondents aware of the available services and facilities, 11 stated that they had referred a business to a university or college serving Cornwall. These referrals, unsurprisingly, were most commonly made in response to a specific business need.
- ❖ All but two of the respondents indicated that they would consider referring a business to a university or college serving Cornwall in the

future. When asked what particular services or facilities they would refer a business to, responses varied from training courses and programmes to specific facilities.

- ❖ All but three respondents were aware of CUC before completing the survey, 18 of whom had had some form of direct contact with CUC. A lower proportion of respondents (n=15) were aware of CUC's business support function, 7 of whom had referred a business to this service. The reasons for this referral varied and included the availability of expertise and facilities through CUC that would be of benefit to the business.
- ❖ When asked whether they would consider referring a business to CUC's business support function in the future, 19 respondents stated that they would. The availability of training, covering gaps in business support provision and access to facilities were all cited as reasons for considering such referrals in the future.
- ❖ There was a relatively high level of support for some form of signposting function, with 17 respondents strongly and three slightly agreeing with the statement '*a co-ordinated signposting function is useful to local businesses*'. Respondents were asked why they agreed with this statement; most commonly, answers related to its potential to increase awareness of the available services and improve navigation to them.

Business Support Partner Telephone Interviews: Summary

- ❖ The majority of the business support partners interviewed were engaging with universities and colleges serving Cornwall in some way and had a good level of awareness of the availability of university level education. Working with institutions was largely perceived as a positive experience by these stakeholders, although some respondents commented that businesses and higher education institutions have different working practices, which may constrain the development of relationships.
- ❖ Less than half the advisors had referred a business to a university or college serving Cornwall although all but one indicated that they would consider doing so in the future.
- ❖ Nearly all of the advisors had heard of CUC before completing the survey, and the majority had some form of direct contact with CUC, but as with other surveys in this study, the accuracy of their understanding varied.
- ❖ Over half of respondents reported that they were aware of CUC's business signposting function, seven of whom had referred businesses to it. However, the majority said they would consider referring businesses

in the future. The value of a co-ordinated signposting function, regardless of who provides this service, was generally perceived positively.

Decision Makers Telephone Interviews: Key Findings

- ❖ Between January and February 2010, 47 telephone interviews were conducted with key decision makers and influencers. This included those individuals with a direct interest in the economic regeneration of Cornwall from across strategic public and private organisations.
- ❖ Unsurprisingly, all 47 respondents stated that they were aware of CUC prior to the interview. Similarly, when asked '*what do you understand CUC's key aims to be*' the majority of respondents referred to educational activities. For example, 43 of the respondents spoke about CUC's aim to provide access to higher education in Cornwall. In addition, almost half of respondents thought that CUC aimed to strengthen the local economy.
- ❖ A large majority of respondents agreed that the expansion of higher education in Cornwall had delivered benefits to potential students, local businesses, the wider economy and community in Cornwall. The benefits attributed to expansion included the availability of higher education opportunities for local people, attracting potential students from outside the county and positively impacting upon the local economy.
- ❖ When prompted, 37 respondents indicated that they did not think that these benefits could have been achieved without the six CUC partners working together. Common explanations for this perception related to the broad, and often unspecified, benefits of partnership working (n=20).
- ❖ Perceptions of CUC were explored further through the presentation of a series of statements relating to CUC's role and aims, against which respondents were asked to rate the extent of their agreement. A total of 44 respondents agreed with the statement '*CUC plays an important role in Cornwall's regeneration*' and 38 agreed that '*CUC provides a pioneering new model for higher education delivery*'.
- ❖ To provide further insight into perceptions of CUC's work to date, respondents were also asked if their expectations of it had been met, exceeded, or failed. Overall, the work of CUC was found to have either met or exceeded the majority of respondents' expectations. A total of 29 respondents cited an example of how their expectations had been met and 19 of an exceeded expectation. Common examples of exceeded and met expectations related to CUC's involvement in widening participation in the county; provision of higher education; the success of the partnership working; its external engagement; and in a similar vein, its contribution to the economy.

- ❖ However, 27 respondents described an action or activity that had failed to meet their expectations. The most commonly cited factor underpinning this was a lack of engagement between CUC, its partners, and businesses. Some responses also highlighted the competing goals of individual institutions.
- ❖ Similar issues emerged in response to the question, '*Still thinking about CUC and its work, are there any aspects that you feel should be changed?*' Over half of the respondents answered 'yes' to this question. The most commonly suggested change related to CUC's engagement and openness with its stakeholders. Additional suggested changes included: development of the CUC partnership; strengthening CUC's ability to respond to stakeholders' needs through the provision of courses that support business development; and the need for it to widen access and participation.
- ❖ Within the key decision makers group, all but one of the 47 respondents were aware of the investment that CUC had drawn from the European Commission and UK Government. Of those respondents, 37 were aware of the level of this investment. Generally the impacts of this investment were viewed positively. Notably, almost half of respondents felt that the investment was pivotal to the establishment of CUC.
- ❖ Perceptions of higher education provision within Cornwall were also explored; respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement: '*the higher education needs of the county are currently being met by existing offers*'. A total of 25 respondents agreed with this statement, 21 slightly and four strongly, and 13 disagreed (6 slightly and 7 strongly). The remaining respondents either responded '*don't know*' or expressed no opinion ('*neither/nor*').
- ❖ All respondents were asked what they thought the priorities for higher education in Cornwall should be over the next five years. The two most frequent responses related to provision tying into Cornwall's economic strategy and greater engagement. The latter response related mainly to engagement with the business community, but some respondents also referred to the wider community in terms of schools and learners. For example, when respondents spoke of engagement, they often alluded to their desire for CUC to be more responsive and flexible towards the needs of business and the wider community.
- ❖ A large majority of the key decision makers saw CUC as instrumental to the delivery of Cornwall's higher education priorities over the next five years (n=45). These respondents were asked '*how do you think CUC can support the delivery of these priorities?*' In reflecting a key theme of

the responses, increased engagement with CUC's stakeholders was the most commonly highlighted issue.

- ❖ When the respondents were asked '*How can CUC improve the way it communicates with you in the future*', 13 respondents stated that they were happy with the output and felt that there was no need to change current provision. Where changes were suggested, they most commonly related to increased direct contact and a more targeted and co-ordinated approach to communications. Suggested improvements to the way in which CUC communicates with its wider stakeholders generally reiterated the same themes of engagement. Respondents commonly referred to direct and visible engagement as a key means of improving communication.

Decision Makers and Influencers Telephone Interviews: Summary

- ❖ The findings presented here show that the expansion of higher education in Cornwall is generally viewed positively by key decision makers, with a majority of respondents perceiving this expansion to have generated benefits for the county. The majority of respondents felt that the CUC partnership played an important role in securing these benefits. Although it was generally thought that the partnership had mobilised institutions to deliver its objectives, some respondents thought that the primary goal of partners is to achieve their individual goals rather than a common objective. However, the most commonly identified area where changes could be made related to CUC's engagement activities with the business and wider community.
- ❖ Support for the future expansion of higher education activities was high. The key decision makers generally agreed that there should be more opportunities to study at university level; and that the research and business support activities should be expanded.
- ❖ There was some consensus that improvements could be made to the way in which CUC communicates with key decision makers and wider stakeholders. In particular, a more direct, targeted and co-ordinated means of communication were suggested.

Conclusions:

- ❖ This report has presented the findings from five different stakeholder surveys covering: the local population; gatekeepers; businesses; business support partners; and, key decision makers. In considering the findings, the sample size of respondents within each group should be borne in mind as CUC wished only to provide insight into the views held

by each group and not a statistically representative sample which would have gone beyond the resources allocated for the study.

- ❖ Across all five surveys, it is clear that a high level of awareness exists concerning the availability of higher education within Cornwall. In addition, the expansion of, and continued investment within, higher education was generally well supported across CUC's stakeholder groups.
- ❖ Although CUC appeared to be viewed positively by respondents, it is difficult to determine whether or not these perceptions were attributable to its partners. One exception to this is the findings from the key decision makers' telephone interviews. A majority of this stakeholder group felt that the benefits generated by the expansion of higher education in Cornwall could not have been achieved without CUC. For many of these respondents, partnership working was considered key in securing the benefits for potential students, local economy and wider community.
- ❖ However, some of the key decision makers interviewed were somewhat critical of the level engagement thus far between CUC and the private sector, or indeed with individual businesses. This perception was, to some extent, supported by the findings from the business and business support partner surveys, where a lack of understanding of the services and facilities available was commonly cited as a factor deterring engagement. Given that many businesses and support partners indicated that they would consider accessing a CUC partner's offer in the future, this would seem to be an area for further targeted development.

Suggested Actions:

- ❖ Drawing upon the findings from all five surveys some points for consideration and supporting actions have been formulated to inform CUC's future communications with its stakeholders.
- ❖ It is suggested that further consideration be given to whether (and which) stakeholders need to understand the distinction between CUC and its constituent partners. Existing CUC communications, such as the '*Little Yellow Book*' seek to set out what CUC is and does but the findings presented here suggest that its message is not fully received or understood by its different stakeholder groups. If the distinction is seen as important it may be necessary to produce additional targeted information for key groups.
- ❖ To encourage further engagement from businesses and support partners specifically it is suggested that future communications should seek to

demonstrate how the available services and support can assist the business base within the county. This could be achieved through the development of a range of case studies to highlight the services and support on offer and the impact of previous activities. To ensure maximum impact, the dissemination of information regarding the diverse offers from each of the partner organisations should be co-ordinated as far as possible.

- ❖ It is suggested that additional insights into preferred messaging could be achieved through further research. For example, focus groups with each of the stakeholder groups would provide an opportunity to ‘test out’ which communication messages and mechanisms would yield optimum impacts.
- ❖ Consideration should also be given to repeating the perceptions study at agreed intervals over time to enable the development of a longitudinal evidence base.