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Brussels plays fairy godmother to seal partnership

European funding has created an environment for the successful alliance of academia and industry

Tom Rowland

Unlike marriages, partnerships between academic institutions and IT companies are never made in heaven – but some of the most successful are made in Brussels these days.

Professor José Fiadeiro, head of the department of computer science at the University of Leicester, teamed up with Luis Andrade, the chief executive of Lisbon-based ATX Technologies.

MSc students love the idea of universities partnering IT companies to help to deliver programme content and ensure that their computer science masters programmes remain relevant to the real world. But universities struggling to operate without grants may be surprised at the extent of EU largesse, if the two partners can tick the correct cross-border boxes.

Leicester and ATX succeeded in making the European grant dispensing system work to their mutual advantage. They applied for European funds from the Marie Curie Transfer of Knowledge Industry-Academia Partnership.

The fund aims to create and develop durable partnerships between the academic world and small and medium-sized companies across EU borders. The university must be in one community country, the company in another.

Project funding is from €200,000 to €1,200,000 (£140,000 to £840,000), to cover the recruitment and living expenses of the researchers and an unspecified contribution to the costs of the research. Only a few were awarded in the first round; one was to Leicester and ATX.

Fiadeiro says: “This sort of partnership works because there is a personal partnership. I am the professor of computer science at Leicester and I am also a good friend of the chief executive of the company. I think a lot of successful partnerships are born from successful personal relationships.”

It works both ways. Two ATX staff have been seconded to do research at Leicester, while staff from the university go to Lisbon to train ATX personnel while also gaining experience working on commercial projects. ATX specialises in reengineering legacy systems, updating and integrating existing computer systems as organisations adapt and change.

A new MSc in software engineering for financial services is to begin at Leicester next year with input from ATX. It will be the latest addition to a portfolio of six MSc degrees, including one in agile software engineering techniques. Leicester’s computer science department has 29 MSc students – 70 per cent of whom are from overseas – and has two annual starts: one in October and a second in January, timed to pick up those who have problems in obtaining entry visas.

Through the partnership the university has the chance to work in a commercial environment and to interact with people who are developing systems. ATX is opening a UK office in Leicester and the MSc programme seems a fertile recruiting ground.

At Nottingham University, a partnership between the department of computer science and Rare, the video games powerhouse acquired in 2002 by Microsoft, happened more or less by accident, says Dr Peter Blanchfield, co-ordinator of the computer science MSc programme.

Microsoft was keen to promote its new computer games development tool, XMA, and Blanchfield was teaching a relevant module to his masters students. Microsoft ended up donating a batch of Xboxes to the students and Blanchfield says he accepted them, burying his reticence towards the computer giant because XMA is essentially

an open-source system.

Using XMA and the Xboxes, the students have developed some nifty applications, including an air hockey game with realistic clicks, sounds and animations. It was so good that Rare is offering the developers jobs.

Real-world experience pays dividends

Stephen Gorton, 26, graduated with an MSc in software engineering for the e-economy from Leicester University in 2005.

He is currently commuting between Leicester and Lisbon and works for ATX Technologies, which has set up a partnership with the computer science department at Leicester.

“A lot of the course was about advanced system design, software architectures and software reengineering – exactly the area where ATX is involved,” he explains.

“I did my first degree at Leicester and I was persuaded to stay on for the masters course by my final-year supervisor.”

Gorton was one of four students on the masters course who stayed on to continue his studies after graduating, he says.

He enrolled to do a PhD in the computer science department but now that he is working for the company he intends to complete his doctorate on a part-time basis.

“I got to know ATX through its involvement at Leicester. This has worked very well for me because it ran an industrial tutorial for the first week of the masters programme and we learnt about some systems reengineering in the real world.”

The company is now expanding its business into the UK and Gorton will be working in the new ATX technical office in Leicester.

He adds: “I got married in Leicester too, so I do not think I am going to leave any time soon.”

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