



Supporting Employability through the Challenge Academy Framework

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Employability Support to students.



Securing a first job can be difficult. Competition is fierce and there is a need for students to make sure their application stands-out from the crowd. It is no longer enough to hold a degree; today's graduates need to have work experience that demonstrates they can turn theory into practice.

Challenge Academy is a University programme which has been created to enhance students' employability profile. They can become involved in one, or a number of practical challenges, and each one is designed to strengthen their CV and improve prospects in the graduate job market.



UK Landscape/Backdrop:

- Economic uncertainty (Brexit)
- Low business confidence
- Political instability (Government uncertainty)
- Operational difficulties at university level (demographics/fees/policies)
- Young people are sceptical about the value of university education
- Financial burden placed on students
- Need to generate business capable students (employability focus)
- Businesses need low cost support and encouragement to network better



Challenge Academy can help to build capability?

Challenge Academy can help to address skills gaps. It offers a low risk way of acquiring short term support for businesses, and other organisations, in order to improve their capabilities.

At the same time organisations will be supporting a student and helping them to acquire valuable employability experience, which will help them to secure a graduate level job.



Challenge Academy is a unique initiative that brings businesses together with expert academics and innovative University students to work on issues or challenges that are blocking organisational growth and performance.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students are assigned to work on challenges that are based on their subject expertise and experience. They are supported throughout the challenges by an academic who has significant practical experience in the type of work being completed.

Challenges typically last for around three weeks and can cover a wide range of business activities. Previous challenges have included creating marketing campaigns and strategies, developing apps and digital platforms and researching market expansion opportunities.



Challenge Academy has been embedded into the University's strategic plan to address three key objectives:

- 50% of academic modules to have employer, practitioner, professional engagement.
- 50% of students to have work experience, volunteering, internship, work based learning as part of their course.
- Enhance and extend extra-curricular opportunities for engagement with external partners.



The Process

Organisations provide challenges (opportunities or problems) facing their business.

Challenges are flexible but will typically consist of bite sized interventions (notionally around 3 weeks work captured within a semester).

Expectations are managed: Free student support not paid consultancy!



Challenge Academy

Challenge Academy is designed to fit into students' existing studies.

It reinforces academic learning through practical business applications under the supervision of an academic (or professional) mentor.



Key Outcomes:

- Improves student engagement.
- Reinforces academic studies.
- Strengthens graduate employability.
- Provides case study material for curriculum enhancement.



Key Outcomes:

- Widens academics' network and experience.
- A more stimulating learning experience (opportunity for organisations to have an input into classroom).
- Opportunity to work with other faculties.
- Aligns with TEF and QAA enterprise requirements.



How does Challenge Academy Operate at the University of Wolverhampton?

1. Academic Modules (Assignments and Case Studies)
2. Work Based Study Modules and Dissertations
3. Individual Student Experience (1-1 engagement)



Challenge Academy Network:

- Students Register on www.wlv.ac.uk/ChallengeAcademy, highlighting their area of interest, available time, and ability to travel.
- They are matched against a suitable challenge and a mentor is assigned to help them to complete the task.
- Students are given support and invited to seminars and networking events (CAST) to sharpen their skills. The network is student focused and team managed.



Growing Challenge Academy:

- We continually look for modules that can be aligned with Challenge Academy.
- Ideal modules that are assignment driven, where challenges could be aligned to module outcomes.
- Where possible, module assignments are standardised around Challenge Academy themes and then suitable challenges parachuted onto them in time for semester launches.
- Module leaders are introduced to Organisations/Managers and receive continued support from the faculty team.



At induction events students are asked the following questions:

Are you an 'ideas person' who relishes a challenge?

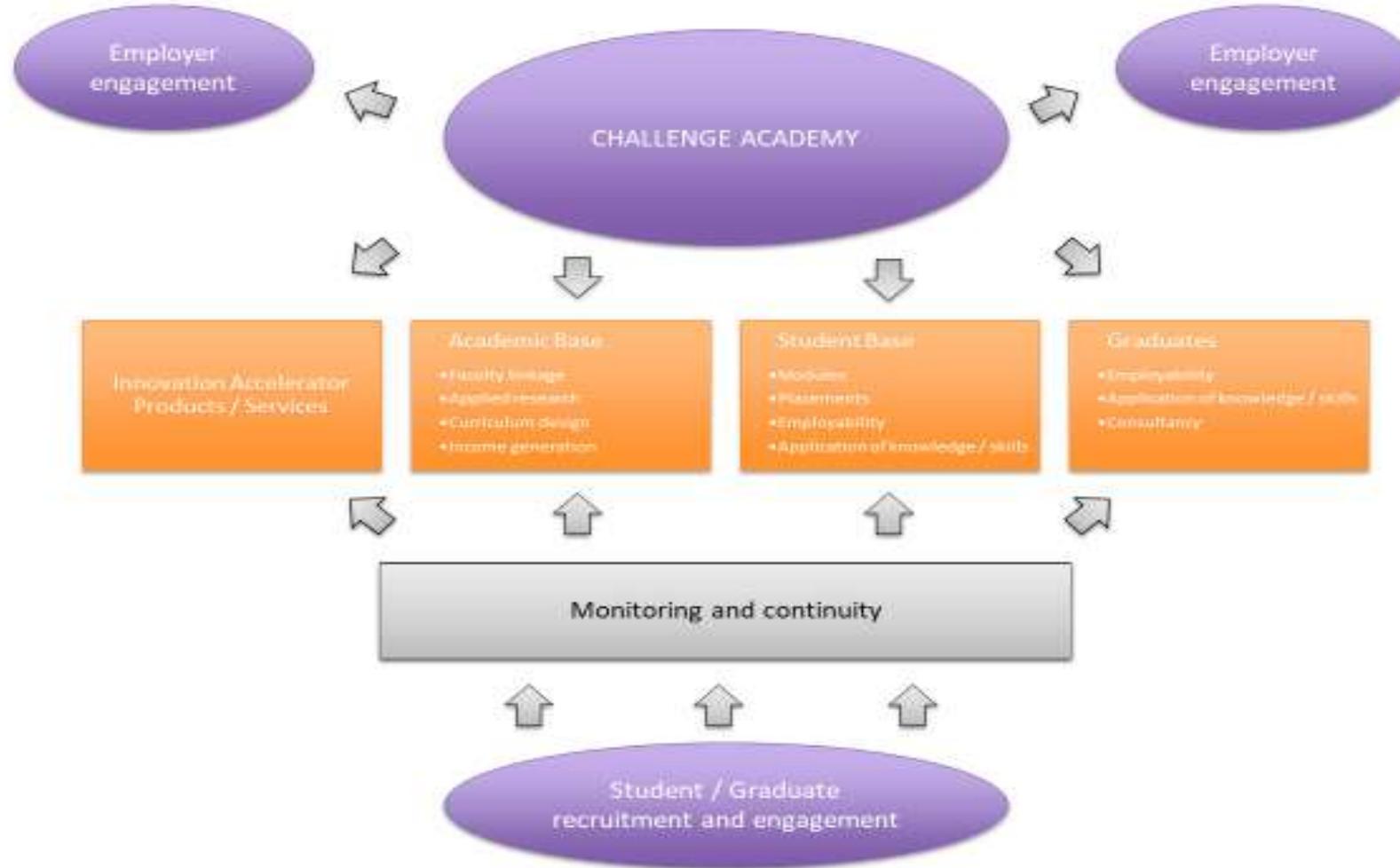
Are you enthusiastic and self-motivated?

Do you want to work on 'real life' issues in businesses and other organisations?

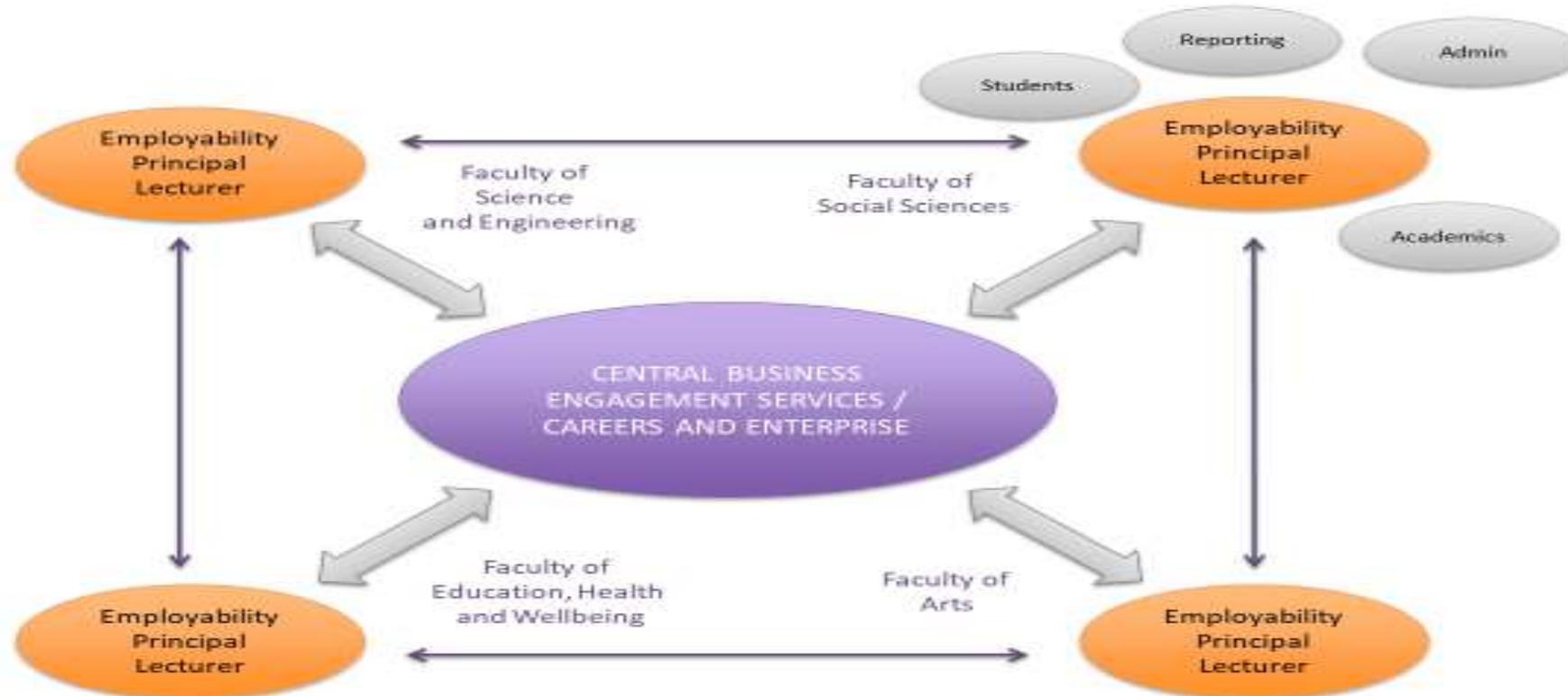
Then **Challenge Academy** is for you.



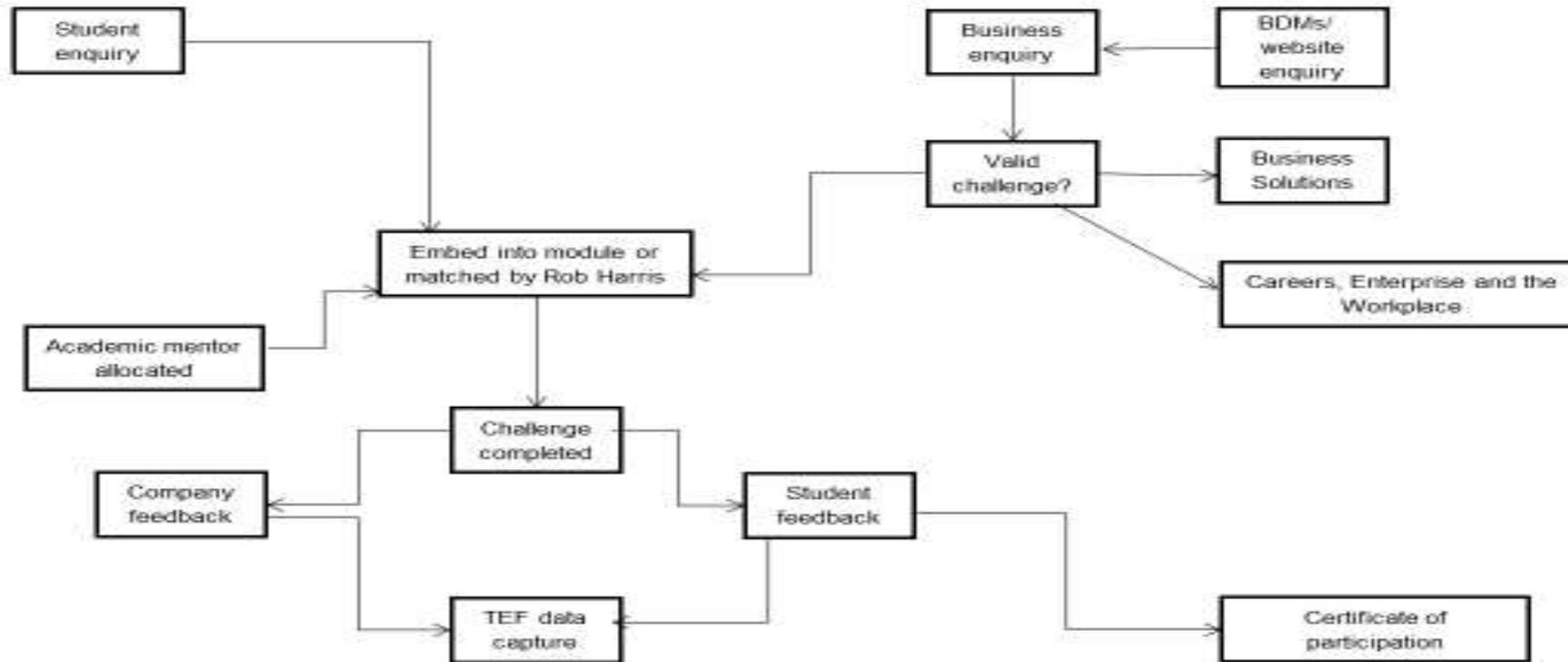
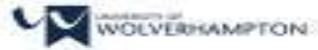
Challenge Academy Model (UK)



Operational Engagement Model (University of Wolverhampton)

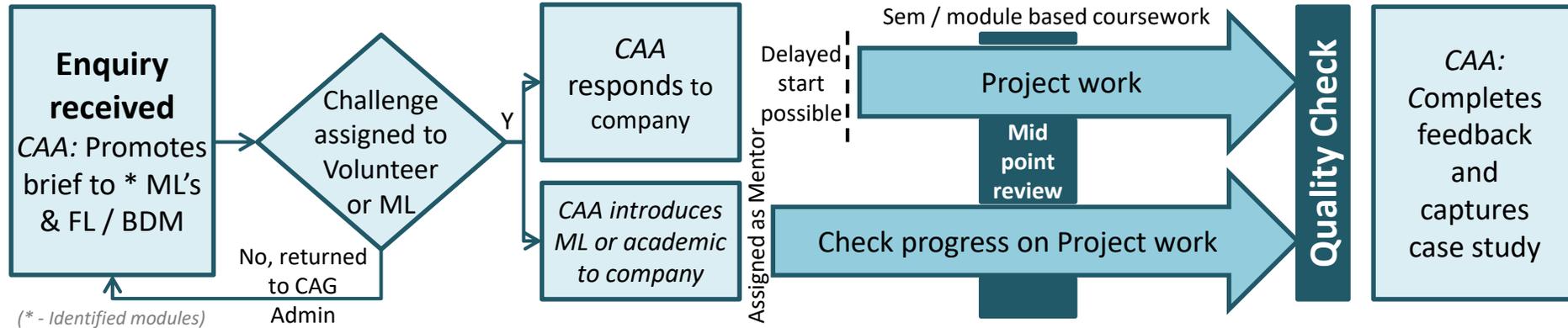


Faculty Implementation Process

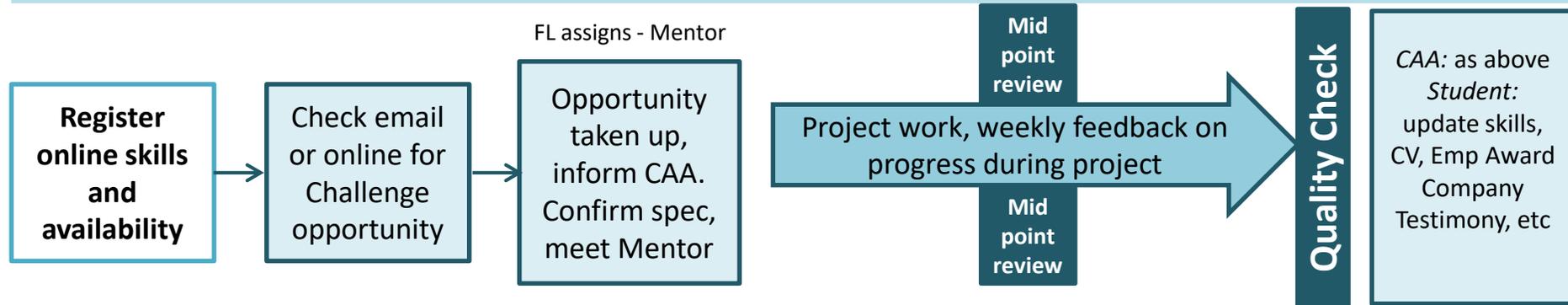


FoSS Flow Process for Managing Challenges

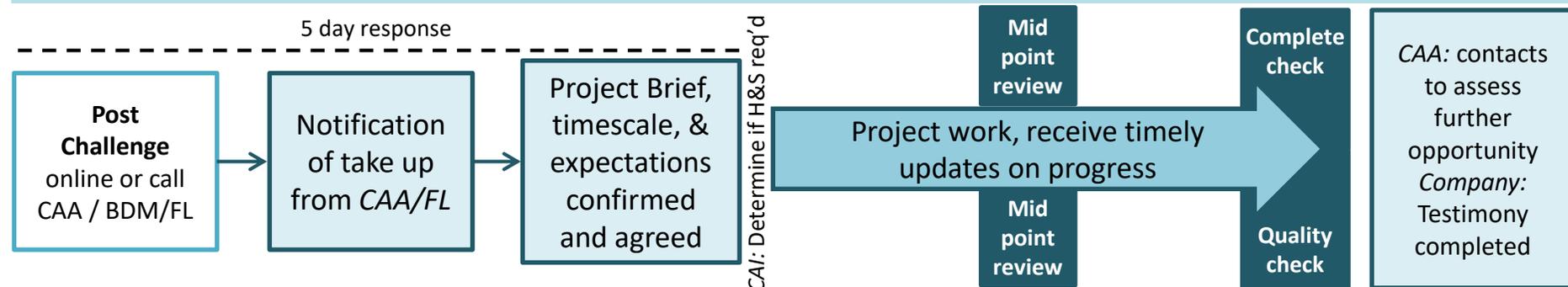




Student (Challenge Academy volunteer, or request to undertake Dissertation/Work Based Product research)



Company



Data Capture Process:

Challenge Data Capture Sheet (Compiled and Updated by Project Administrator):

Company name	Contact name
Email address	Telephone number
Faculty	
Allocated to module(s). Please include module code, title and module leader. <i>or</i>	
Allocated to student (name and number):	
Date enquiry received Date allocated	
Challenge received	
Challenge allocated	
Follow up (note action + date)	
Feedback received	



Achievements:

- Over 1000 students have engaged with Challenge Academy over the past 3 years
- Programme has expanded to include a seminar & training programme (CAST)
- During the last academic year 870 students across the university have engaged with Challenge Academy and linked to 47 Organisations. An increasing number of academics and modules have aligned to Challenge Academy and around 120 students participated in CAST applied seminars.



Achievements:

- Feedback from all stakeholders is extremely positive
- Opportunity to develop international relationships (through Link You)
- Building on success through a funding bid (£10M OfS tender)
- Evidence of a contribution to improving regional business capability (see Fixed Wheel Brewery Case Study)
- Evidence of improving the propensity of regional SME's to engage with networking and develop relationships with HEI's



Client Testimony:

“The support provided by the University’s Challenge Academy has helped Fixed Wheel to develop an active marketing function. The students have provided a platform of research, which has enabled a deeper understanding of our industry and competition to be achieved.

From this knowledge base, we have been able to assess the potential strategic routes available to Fixed Wheel and apply metrics to potential scenarios. We now have a solid strategic plan in place which is guiding our growth. Through the creative guidance of

Wolverhampton’s students, we are more proficient in the use of digital marketing technologies, particularly social media marketing. Sales turnover has improved as a result of the University’s support and our employee base has increased and been protected. The business now has a more professional structure and has a greater strategic focus. It also networks to a greater extent, which we have learned is a contemporary critical success factor. Longer term benefits will hopefully be achieved through continued market expansion and international engagement, which will further reinforce our position. We look forward to continuing to work with the University and it’s students in the future.”

Scott Povey Fixed Wheel Brewery.



Student Testimony:

“I have studied at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels at Wolverhampton. I was mindful that there can be an overlap of materials between courses and module delivery can be too theoretical, particularly at Masters level. I wanted to work in applied marketing so chose the MSc Marketing Management Award. At induction we were told the course would be linked to Challenge Academy, which seemed very positive. I have subsequently worked on a number of challenges through MSc modules and have enjoyed the opportunity to work with real life businesses. The experience was immensely valuable in helping me secure my first job in the manufacturing sector. In fact my employer wants to sign up to the programme too” Elliot Rushton 2018



Student Testimony:

“In my final year I felt a huge uncertainty in my own ability and was struggling to see the value in what I had learnt. I was worried about future employment and whether the course really had equipped me with the knowledge and experience I needed. My Challenge Academy business case was a perfect fit for my chosen research topic. I feel that it was because of this experience that I was able to achieve my own objectives for knowledge and personal growth. I now feel more confident in my own ability and satisfied that I have achieved my own objective of specializing in marketing and have improved future employment prospects in doing so.” (Leanne Coles; Graduate 2016)

University’s can make a real impact on their students experience and employability prospects, by engaging with Challenge Academy.

