University of Wolverhampton:
Setting a benchmark for regionally focused higher education

In 2016, Wolverhampton University set out an ambitious vision for the next five years. With an overarching mission of *"Maximising opportunity through generating knowledge, innovation and enterprise"*, the institution set out a strategic plan based on the following three pillars:

- **Students First**
- **Skills and Knowledge for Economic and Social Transformation**
- **Significant Influence and Impact**.

Whilst these may seem like fairly standard goals things for a university, what marks Wolverhampton out from most other universities is that the vision comes with a clear commitment to really making a big impact on their area. For instance, the three pillars mentioned above were accompanied by pledges to achieve the following by 2021:

- Provide learning, research and engagement opportunities which target the economic and social needs *of the areas in which we operate*
- Seek to eliminate inequality by narrowing the skills gap *within the communities we serve*
- Be renowned as a University that makes impact *regionally*, nationally and internationally.

Clearly the university is committed to having a big impact on regional skills and growth, but the question is, how are they attempting to accomplish their aims?

Investment and partnership

A critical part of the university's plans to accomplish their goals is to invest in new facilities. Back in 2015 £250 million was pledged for new projects, and these have included a new Business School, new facilities for engineering, and the creation of a construction and built environment super-campus.

The university also understands that the key to the success of these ventures lies in working alongside other local stakeholders with an interest in achieving local growth, including local authorities and particularly the three regional Local Enterprise Partnerships – Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, The Marches, and Black Country LEP. As the university's Vice Chancellor, Geoff Layer, commented back in 2015:

> *The University very much sees itself playing a pivotal role in the region, as an anchor institution shaping economic development. We will be working closely with partners within local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships to make sure we maximise the investment potential we have.*

Using Labour Market Insight to understand local industry needs

In addition to investment and partnership, the university also recognises that in order to achieve their goal of having an impact on their region, they need to get a better understanding of what their region needs – particularly the skills needs of employers, and the sectors it needs to prioritise. To help gain this understanding, the university has recently invested in Emsi's Labour Market Insight (LMI) tool, *Analyst*. With its ability to give granular economic data right down to the level of LEP and even local authority level, the university sees it as a powerful way of finding answers quickly and simply to the following sorts of questions:

- Which industries and occupations are growing and which are declining in the region?
- What new opportunities related to growth sectors and jobs can we prioritise?
- How well does our current course portfolio reflect the needs of our region's employers?

Identifying answers to these and other questions not only helps the university to understand better the skills needs of the region and how well they are currently meeting that demand, but it also feeds back into its investment strategy and its strategic partnerships. For instance, if the data shows that a particular industry is set to grow, then this can inform decisions about where to invest resources. If the data shows that there are particular skills needs, then this can inform how the university can work with the local authorities and LEPs, not to mention local employers.

From the desire to impact its area, to its focus on investment, partnerships and understanding the needs of regional industry, it is clear that the University of Wolverhampton is really setting a benchmark for what regionally-focused higher education might look like. As the Head of Lifelong Learning, Dr Mary Mahoney commented:

> *We believe that we have huge potential to really shape and have an impact on our region. By taking the steps we have taken, we are already making a difference, both in terms of helping local employers to get the skills they need and – the flip side of that – giving our students better opportunities to find sustainable employment across the region.*