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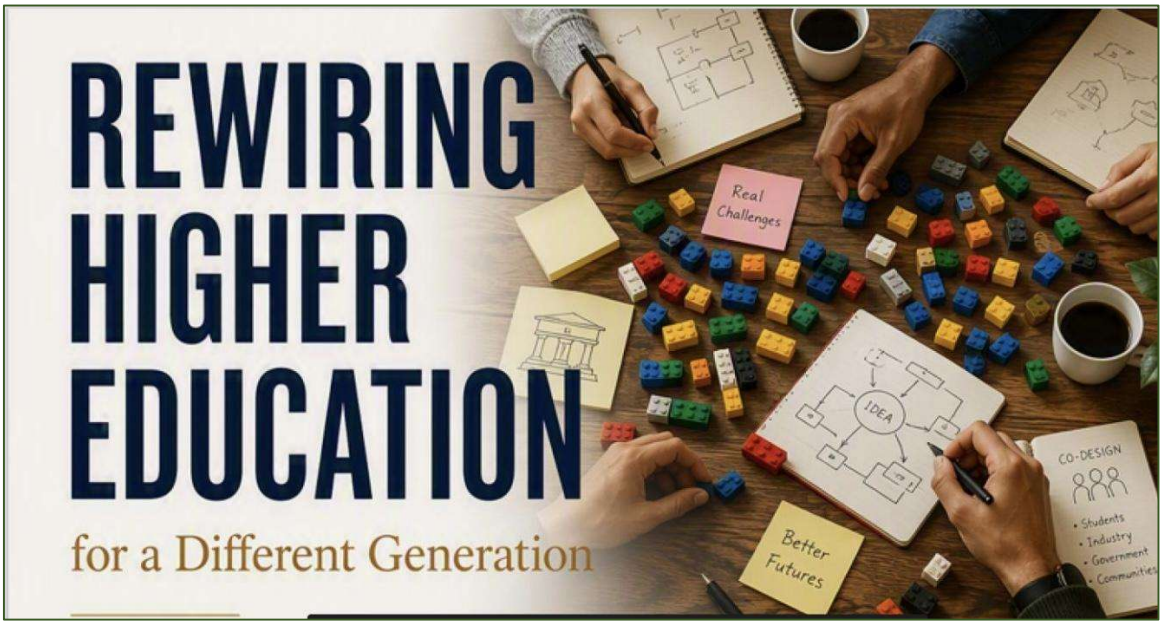
Rewiring Higher Education for a Different Generation

Building University–Industry Ecosystems for Graduate Skills Development in the Western Cape

Event report

9 November 2026 | STIAS Stellenbosch | In person

Convened through the Cape Higher Education Consortium Higher Education Leadership Academy with Management Center Innsbruck and collaborating partners



Overview

The workshop brought higher education, business, government and intermediary organisations together to explore how university–industry collaboration can strengthen graduate capabilities and respond to real organisational and societal challenges. Its main contribution was to connect system reform, project-based learning, international collaboration and practical ecosystem design within one programme.

Presentations were followed by a LEGO Serious Play co-design exercise in which participants constructed higher education ecosystems and made relationships, resources and priorities visible. The proposed continuation is a capstone in January 2027, linking workshop learning to a practical intervention. The materials support an account of

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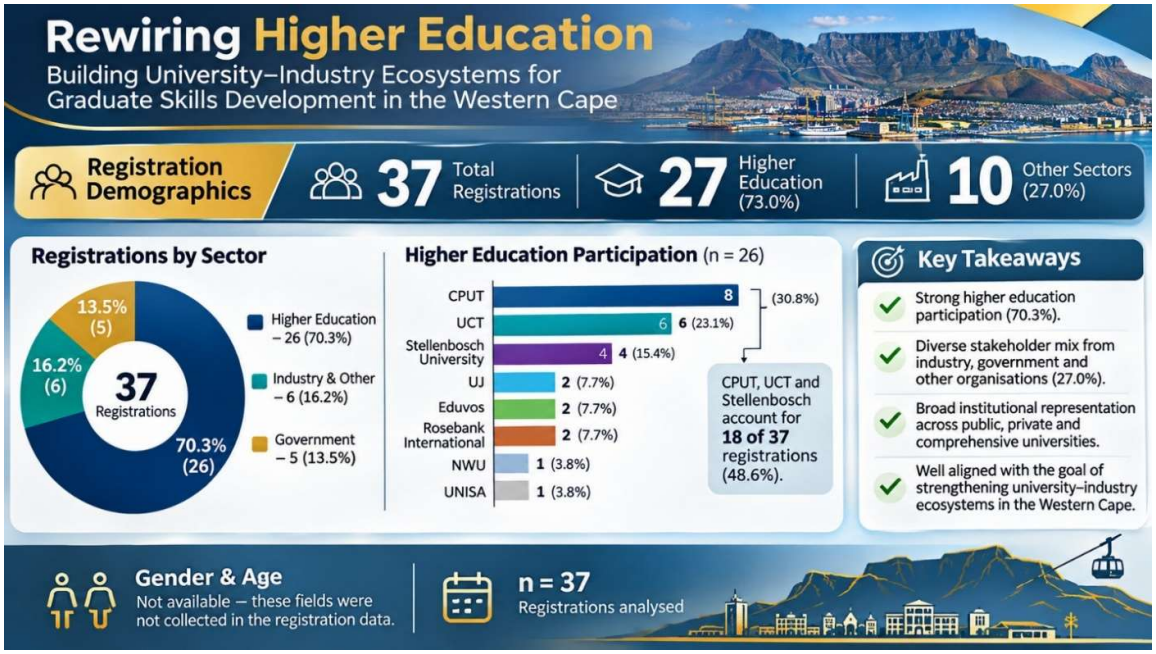
Members: University of Cape Town,
Stellenbosch University, University of the Western Cape,
Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Directors: E Ramugondo, N Koopman, NRM Madiba (Chair), R Balkaran, TE Cloete (CEO)

shared ideas and design outputs; they do not yet establish sustained changes in graduate employment or business performance.

Participation and attendance

Attendance by institution or organisation



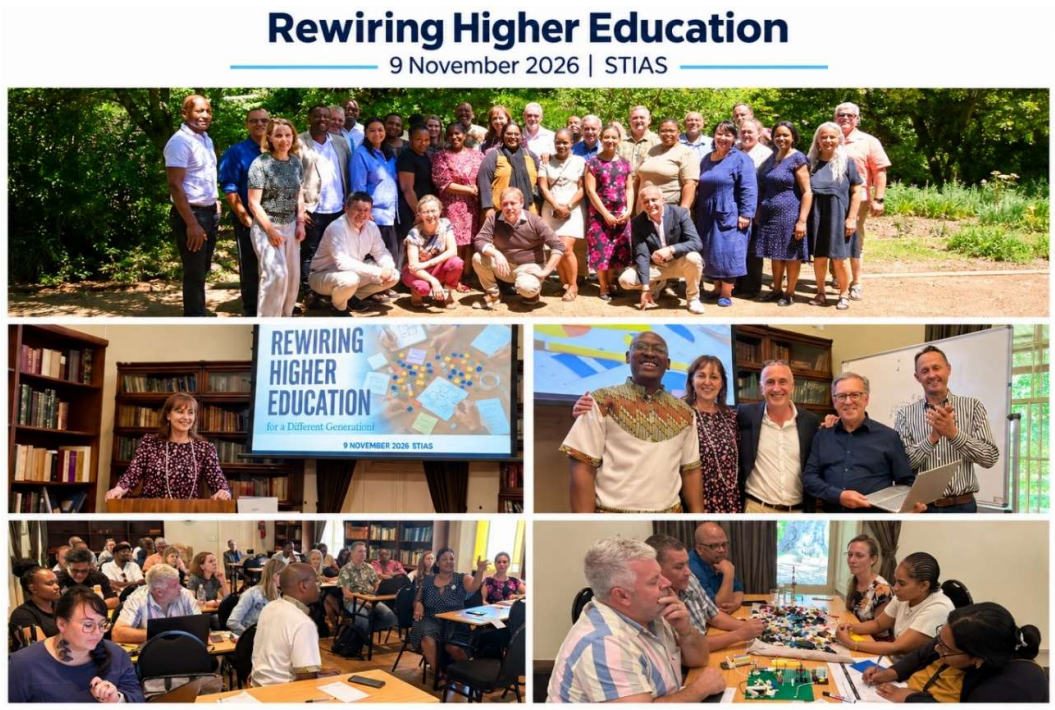
Programme

The published programme followed a progression from the higher education challenge to collaboration models, international experience and collective design using the HE on TRIAL as foundation.

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

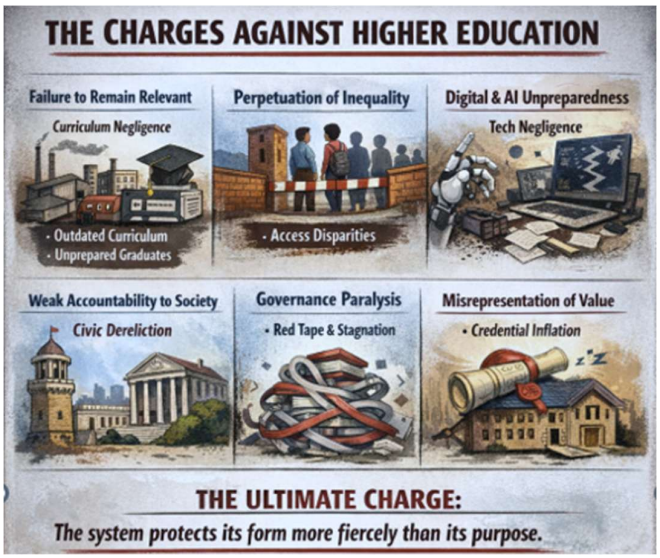
Time	Session	Lead
08:30 – 09:00	Registration, Networking & Coffee	All
09:00 – 09:20	Welcome & workshop overview	Dr Lester Sigauke (MCI)
09:20 – 10:10	**Session 1 –** The Challenge: Higher Education on Trial	Prof René Pellissier (CHEC)
10:10 – 10:50	**Session 2 –** The opportunity and solution: Developing a Project-Based University–SME Collaboration Model	David Rupertsberger (MCI) (Introduction by Dr Lester Sigauke)
10:50 – 11:10	**Tea break**	
11:10 – 11:50	**Session 3 –** The evidence: International experiences in project-based learning	Prof. Dr Gerhard Hillmer (MCI)
11:50 – 12:30	**Session 4 –** The solution: Building the Next Generation of Educational Programmes	Dr Lester Sigauke (MCI); Prof René Pellissier (CHEC)
12:30 – 13:15	**Lunch**	
13:15 – 15:10	**Session 5 –** The action: Co-Designing Future Programmes	Gareth Stead (Xpand SA consulting)
15:10 – 15:25	**Tea break**	
15:25 – 16:15	**Session 6 –** Programme Showcase & Interactive Evaluation	Gareth Stead (Xpand SA consulting)
16:15 – 16:30	Closing reflections & next steps	Prof. Hillmer & Dr Sigauke / Prof Pellissier

Session 5 used multi-disciplinary LEGO Serious Play to design possible collaborative programmes. Session 6 provided for group showcases and evaluation through Slido. The six criteria are set out later in this report.



Main themes and contributions

Higher education reform and regional cooperation



Prof René Pellissier framed the challenge of transforming higher education through the metaphor of "teaching the elephant to dance": enabling a large, complex and heavily regulated university system to become more agile, responsive and socially relevant. Her presentation highlighted the tension between institutional autonomy and government oversight, alongside incentive structures and rankings that reward research more consistently than teaching innovation, engagement and contributions to society.

Drawing on "Higher Education on Trial", she described a one-day summit organised with the Western Cape Government as a courtroom drama. National and international experts presented evidence for and against higher education, followed by jury deliberation and participation from an online audience. The proceedings questioned graduate relevance, persistent inequality, digital readiness, accountability, governance and clarity of institutional purpose. Concerns about the next five years included weak alignment with economic and societal needs, institutional insularity and rigid structures that constrain adaptation.

The Rewiring presentation connected these challenges to the SADC Higher Education Strategy and the SADC University of Transformation, envisaged as a networked, digitally enabled and socially embedded ecosystem. Access, qualifications and mobility, skills, partnerships, infrastructure, research and financing were presented as interconnected areas of transformation. The proposed response emphasised stronger foundations, translating research into impact, and cooperation across institutions, government, industry and communities.

A central proposal was a "university of universities", through which institutions could share projects, facilities, expertise and learning opportunities. In the South African context, this could support movement between universities, credit transfer, access to shared resources and more flexible pathways incorporating badges and micro-credentials within an aligned qualifications framework. Pellissier argued that progress could begin through greater cooperation and the better use of existing capacity, with implementation introduced gradually.

The intended contribution is a higher education system better equipped to widen access, address skills gaps and unemployment, and strengthen the relationship between universities and society. Much of the necessary expertise and infrastructure already exists; the challenge is to align incentives, build trust and turn shared commitments into action—to get the elephant to dance.

Identification of the problem



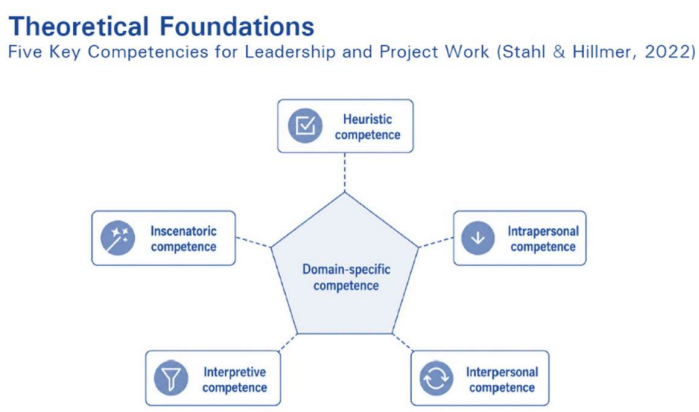
A practical model for university and SME projects

David Rupertsberger's contribution, introduced by Dr Lester Sigauke, addressed graduate work readiness through university–SME collaboration. The integrated summary reports 13 interviews across four stakeholder groups and identifies communication, critical thinking and problem-solving as prominent capability gaps. The proposed model follows five phases: define an achievable SME challenge, match students, deliver with joint mentoring, evaluate learning and business value, and improve the model before scaling.

Trust, clear responsibilities, coordination and sustained commitment were identified as enablers. University rigidity and limited SME time were barriers. The summary explicitly describes business benefits as perceived, which makes piloting and evaluation necessary before claiming effectiveness.

International collaboration and competence development

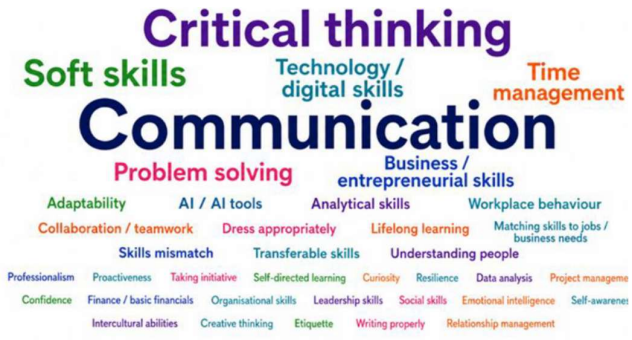
Prof Dr Gerhard Hillmer presented project-based learning, the Hillmer and Stahl skills development model and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as complementary approaches to preparing graduates for changing careers and complex societal challenges. Connecting his presentation to the African Union's Agenda 2063, he emphasised building bridges between Europe and Africa through student collaboration on real-world problems. Hillmer described an early exercise in which European students developed solutions to African Sustainable Development Goal challenges without African partners. The results demonstrated the limitations of working without local knowledge. A subsequent COIL initiative brought European and South African students together in small online teams, supported by an introductory session, coaching and final presentations, with academic credit arrangements agreed between the participating institutions. This approach enabled students to combine different perspectives while developing problem-solving skills, intercultural competence and mutual respect.



The experience also revealed practical constraints. Administrative requirements and rigid module structures slowed implementation, while scheduling required compromise across institutions and time zones. Students' initial hesitation and limited online participation highlighted the need for deliberate relationship building and facilitation. Contributions from South African participants reinforced the importance of educational value beyond formal qualifications, entrepreneurial mindsets, and lecturers' roles as facilitators, mentors and coaches. The Hillmer and Stahl model provided a framework for recognising and developing capabilities through practice and structured reflection. Areas discussed included heuristic competence—addressing problems without ready-made answers—personal competence, self-leadership and interpersonal competence. Drawing on Peter Drucker's *Managing Oneself*, Hillmer also presented a personal leadership development tool that helps students examine their strengths, values, motivations and ways of working. Coaching and reflection support students in recognising, articulating and evidencing what they have learned.

Looking ahead, Hillmer outlined an ecosystem linking universities, industry, non-profit organisations, startup support and experienced professional coaches. A proposed online platform would collect authentic project assignments, maintain student profiles and project records, and use AI to help match students with opportunities aligned with their interests. The ambition is to expand participation from a small number of projects to a much larger collaborative network, positioning education as a practical means of developing capabilities and contributing to societal change.

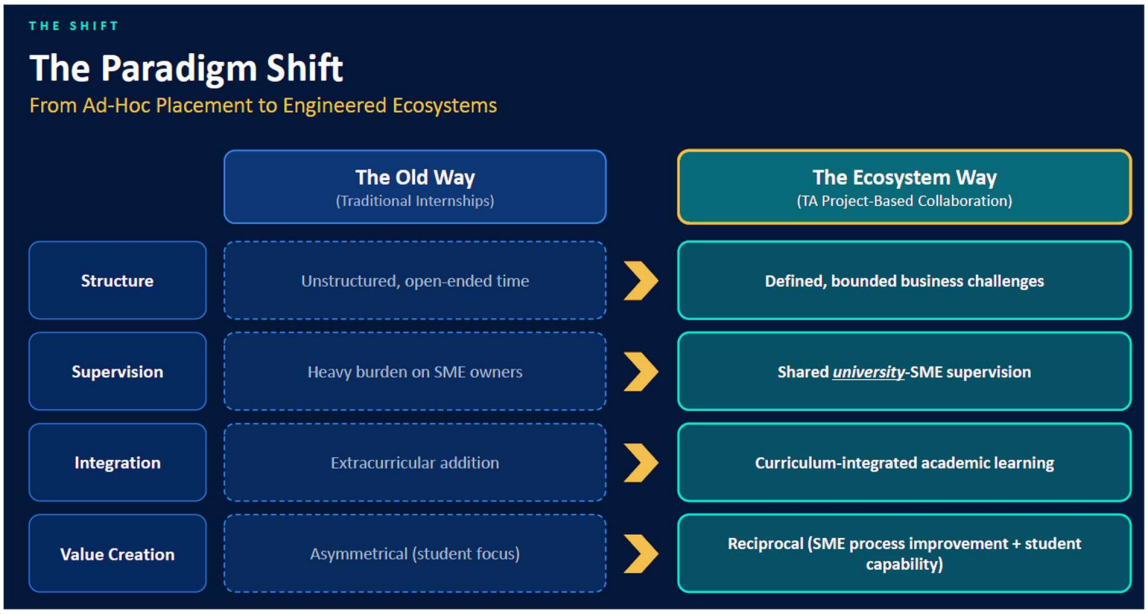
Dr Lester Sigauke linked education innovation to the urgency of strengthening Africa–Europe partnerships and creating opportunities within African economies. He argued that limited employment and career prospects encourage highly skilled Africans to seek opportunities abroad, while Europe faces a mismatch between education provision and industry needs, including shortages in trades such as plumbing, electrical work and welding. In his assessment, these interconnected pressures are unsustainable: African countries risk losing talent needed for their development, while Europe faces growing migration pressures alongside persistent skills shortages.



Sigauke called for partnerships between African and European industries that build local capacity, stimulate economic activity and create employment within African partner regions. He also emphasised a change in educational approaches through collaborative online international learning (COIL), competence development and problem-based learning. Although these approaches cannot generate large numbers of jobs immediately, they can prepare graduates and future leaders to address complex challenges, support innovation and strengthen local economies. His central message was that education and industry collaboration should expand opportunities for talented people to contribute meaningfully within Africa. The numerical migration claims made during the discussion are understood as speaker estimates rather than independently verified statistics.

The solution: From separate initiatives to an ecosystem

The contributions operate at complementary levels: individual projects, curriculum and competence development, institutional cooperation and interregional partnerships. They suggest that a shared project pipeline needs academic recognition, mentoring, stakeholder coordination and evidence of value. The workshop's central implementation question was how to bring these elements together in a manageable joint pilot.



Designing a higher education ecosystem through LEGO play

The afternoon activity, led in the programme by **Gareth Stead** of Xpand SA Consulting, translated discussion into tangible models. Participants used bricks, figures, labels and connections to represent elements of a higher education ecosystem. The activity enabled participants to explore how different actors and functions relate rather than treating graduate development as the responsibility of a single institution.



Principles illustrated by the models

The following interpretation draws on visible labels and structures in the photographs, rather than a verbatim transcript of group presentations.

Design principles	Evidence visible in the photographs
Connected roles and shared responsibility	Separate elements are linked by chains and cords; labels identify academia, business, government, students and communities.
Student and community participation	Student figures and community engagement labels place people within the ecosystem.
Plural knowledge and inclusion	One model explicitly includes indigenous knowledge alongside academia and business.
Purpose and responsiveness	Labels include purpose, direction, critical curriculum, digital natives and resources.
Adaptability and sustainability	Labels identify adaptability, resilience and growth in response to needs; another model includes solar and hydroelectric elements.

Ecosystem models and evaluation principles

The programme and photographed criteria slide identify six principles for evaluating the proposed programmes. Their application below explains how the criteria can guide further development; it does not represent recorded scores or a winning proposal.

Criterion	Question for developing and reviewing a proposal
Industry relevance	Does it respond to a real partner need and develop capabilities relevant to work?
Innovation	What useful change does it introduce to learning, collaboration or practice?
Interdisciplinarity	How are different disciplines, professions and forms of knowledge brought together?
Scalability	What resources and coordination would allow it to extend beyond the initial pilot?
SDG alignment	Which Sustainable Development Goals does it address, and through what activities?
Potential impact	What could change for students, institutions, partners and communities, and how would this be assessed?

The physical models provide a record of collective design, while the criteria offer a way to develop these ideas into assessable proposals. Photographs alone cannot establish group consensus, feasibility or impact. These require the explanatory accounts, partner commitments and follow-up evidence developed through the capstone and any subsequent pilot.

Capstone project and successful completion[1]

The capstone "From insight to intervention" extends the one-day workshop into application within participants' higher education–industry contexts. Participants identify a meaningful challenge, develop a practical response with relevant stakeholders, explain how it was developed and consider its potential longer-term effects. Co-creation is central: the proposed solution should show how stakeholder contributions informed, challenged or improved it.

Component	Requirement
Written capstone report and portfolio evidence	No more than 10 pages, excluding references and appendices. A concise, evidence-informed and professionally presented account, supported by evidence of inquiry, application and reflection.
Capstone presentation	An eight-minute PowerPoint presentation, approximately four to five substantive slides, communicating the argument, proposed intervention and intended impact.
Timing and modality	January 2027; exact date to be confirmed. The summary presentation and closing details in the workshop brief specify virtual delivery.
Successful completion	Full participation in the one-day programme, submission of the written capstone and delivery of the presentation.
Certificate	The workshop brief provides for a joint certificate from the Cape Higher Education Consortium and Management Center Innsbruck.

The four questions to address

1. What was the problem? Define the challenge, evidence and why it matters for graduate development, higher education, industry engagement or the changing world of work.
2. What was the solution? Describe a practical collaborative intervention and explain how it addresses the problem.
3. How was the solution arrived at? Identify stakeholders, the co-creation process and evidence of how their input shaped the response.
4. What is the possible long-term impact? Consider potential effects on students, universities and TVET colleges, industry, communities and the regional ecosystem.

The proposed slide sequence follows these four questions and may add a fifth slide, "Where to next?", setting out what would be required to pilot, sustain and scale the initiative.

Outcomes and continuation

The event created a shared basis for discussing university–industry collaboration and produced visual ecosystem models that participants can develop further. It brought system-level constraints into the same conversation as project design, student capabilities, mentoring and international learning. The models demonstrate the use of participatory design; the proposed capstone creates a route for testing the practical value of the ideas.

[1] CAPSTONE outcomes will be updated after January 2027 event.



The evidence supports immediate outputs: *presentations and discussion, group ecosystem constructions, a common evaluation framework and a defined follow-up assignment. It does not yet establish the implementation of new programmes, improved graduate readiness or sustained regional economic effects. Those outcomes depend on subsequent partner participation and evaluated action.*

Recommended follow-up

Next step	Purpose
Confirm the January capstone arrangements	Communicate the date, hybrid access, submission process and assessment arrangements.
Develop stakeholder-informed capstones	Translate workshop ideas into feasible interventions supported by evidence and partner input.
Select a manageable joint pilot	Agree a real challenge, participating institutions, student roles and named industry mentors.
Resolve academic and coordination requirements	Clarify credit recognition, supervision, workload, resources and the coordination function.
Measure learning and partner value	Establish baseline evidence, student reflection and partner feedback before considering expansion.

The main test of continuation will be whether participants and partners can move from attractive ecosystem designs to a coordinated intervention with clear responsibilities and credible evidence of benefit.