

CASE STUDY

The Greater Manchester Further Education Innovation Partnership

Bringing together all nine colleges across the city region, the Greater Manchester Further Education Innovation Partnership (GMFEIP) strengthens the way businesses access innovation support. Launched in response to gaps in provision across Greater Manchester, the programme positions further education (FE) colleges as trusted, community-embedded institutions that extend innovation activity beyond traditional university and city-centre networks.

Through the GMFEIP programme, colleges welcome small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly those in underserved boroughs or lacking the time and capacity to engage with existing support structures. Activity is delivered through three integrated work packages*, which focus on expanding innovation support for employers, continuing professional development (CPD) for FE staff, and the Innovation Literacy programme for apprentices. Since 2024, more than 2,000 employers have benefited from innovation activity, with most of them accessing innovation support for the very first time.

This case study focuses on the first of these work packages, exploring how innovation hubs support SMEs through business engagement, referral and signposting. Colleges have referred almost 800 businesses onward to organisations such as universities and Innovate UK, helping employers focus on funded activity and longer-term planning.



* Funded by Innovate UK's Further Education Innovation Fund (FEIF), GMFEIP expands the Triple Helix model of innovation that brings together education, industry and government, by recognising FE colleges as key, community-embedded intermediaries. It is delivered through three work packages: (1) Innovation Hubs, providing employer engagement, support, signposting and access to the wider innovation ecosystem; (2) Innovators in Residence, connecting colleges to experts in industry and research to provide staff CPD in latest technologies; (3) the Innovation Literacy Programme which makes adoption of innovation accessible to all, increasing productivity and empowering apprentices to become Apprentice Innovation Ambassadors. Further information is available at: <https://gmcg.ac.uk/feif/>

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The Greater Manchester Further Education Innovation Partnership (Continued)

Atlantic Timber, a family-run timber merchant based in Altrincham, illustrates this approach in practice. The business was experiencing issues with inefficient manual processes and low digital confidence across the workforce. Through Trafford College's FEIP team, the managing director attended an AI awareness event and was subsequently referred to the Turing Innovation Catalyst 'Empower AI' programme. This helped Atlantic Timber to start using AI tools to support daily operations. The college also facilitated further connections with the Business Growth Hub, resulting in successful funding for a computer numerical control (CNC) machine. Overall, this support has enabled the managing director to step back from day-to-day operations and focus more on strategic growth.

Ruche Marketing, a content marketing agency specialising in the legal sector, also engaged with GMFEIP through connections made with a business innovation advisor at The Manchester College. The agency aimed to develop both a training academy for startups and a digital platform to help regulated firms manage compliant marketing activity. Through GMFEIP, the college provided guidance and introduced the team to relevant networks,

events and funding opportunities. This included signposting to AI training, the Open SME platform and Centre for Digital Innovation (CDI), where Ruche Marketing was accepted onto the Sensing/Seizing cohort for businesses developing new digital product ideas.

Both these examples illustrate the role of FE colleges as intermediaries within the regional innovation system. Through signposting, referral and practical support, they enable SMEs to identify and seize opportunities that might otherwise remain out of reach.

