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From Flooding to Covid-19

Masters students from Northumbria University, Newcastle, are helping businesses in Cumbria respond to the challenges of Covid-19 by drawing on lessons learned from flood recovery.

Cumbria was hit hard by flooding in 2009 and in 2015, leaving many businesses and organisations struggling to survive. Now a group of Masters students from Northumbria's Newcastle Business School has been using the experiences of these devastating floods to help businesses in the region recover from the current Covid-19 epidemic. The students are from [The Business Clinic](#), an innovative educational programme offering a free student-led consultancy service to real clients. Operating as teams, they have focused

largely on the hospitality and supply chain sectors in the region.

Dr Les Tickner, Associate Lecturer at Northumbria and former Flood Recovery Manager for Cockermouth, was among the academics supervising the students working on the project. He said: “Cumbria has been hit by devastating floods twice in the past decade and many businesses were forced to close as a result. There was fantastic resilience from these businesses and valuable lessons learned about coping with such massive business interruption and how to develop effective response strategies. The work our students have undertaken through their consultancy has shown how these lessons are directly transferrable to today’s pandemic, and how they can be used by businesses to recover and re-grow their operations. Feedback we have received from organisations including the Cockermouth & District Chamber of Trade has been incredibly positive – citing real benefits for local businesses.”

Included in the student teams was W.T.E.A Consultants, which looked specifically at the hospitality and tourism sector within the Cockermouth area. By analysing the impact from and responses to previous flood events, the four students in W.T.E.A were able to recommend actions local businesses could take to bounce back from the financial damage of Covid-19.

In another example a team called Genie Consultancy interviewed a range of businesses in the supply chain sector to understand how the resilience they developed during the floods can now be applied to Covid-19 recovery plans. Their research found the main challenges faced were a lack of cash flow, losing customers and a fear of stopping the business permanently. Investigation also revealed that the businesses to suffer the most from the pandemic are often the ones that are the least digitalised.

In its report Genie Consultancy said: “The biggest global epidemic since the last century has had an irreparable impact, dramatically disrupting the business environment and pushing the majority of companies to rethink themselves. Just like the flooding, Covid-19 has stopped activities suddenly, preventing businesses interacting directly with their customers. The only real method to rely on has been digital technology and to think about a business model transformation or innovation. Our recommendations have therefore included improving digitalisation and, based on our findings, we have been to offer advice relating to business model transformations, local supply chain and remote working.

“From our interviews and data gathering with businesses who recovered from the floods and are now fighting back from the pandemic we have developed a strategy to help other UK-based SMEs to recover from this pandemic. Our project is about analysing the crisis management and the ability to recover from a crisis. We show the different impacts of Covid-19 and floods, using businesses in Cocker mouth as our focus.”

Andrew Marshall, chairman of Cocker mouth & District Chamber of Trade added: “Managing the impact of Covid-19 is challenging for everyone, but businesses here have shown how they can bounce back in the past and will do so again. The consultancy work from Northumbria’s students has helped shine a light on how the resilience shown by businesses hit by flooding can help shape strategic responses now. The points they make, particularly in relation to getting a greater online presence and being prepared for the practicalities, make really interesting reading and I hope businesses here will take them on board. Thanks to Les and the students for getting us involved.”

Nigel Coates, Director of The Business Clinic at Northumbria, said: “Newcastle Business School established the business clinic in 2013. Since then, the total value of the students’ free consultancy advice and reports – given to more than 400 clients – has been estimated to exceed £2.2m. This is a superb achievement for a programme that both enhances the learning experience of our students and delivers considerable benefits for clients.”

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