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By Lindsay McKenzie

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NMITE project summary



Hereford university plans 'wholly different' engineering courses

The proposed university in Herefordshire, announced in last month's spending review, wants to use American-style teaching to train a new generation of engineers and boost productivity in the region.

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The £47-million project, known as the New Model in Technology and Engineering (NMITE), was highlighted in chancellor George Osborne's joint autumn statement and spending review delivered on 25 November. He has promised £18.25m of government funding for the project, on condition that the group presents a strong business case by March 2016.

The team behind NMITE want it to take in its first cohort of 300 students in 2018. It will model its teaching style on Franklin W Olin College of Engineering near Boston in the United States. Rather than using lecture theatres, students will be taught via problem-based learning methods in seminars and labs in intensive 46-week years. The hope is that this will encourage more people to study engineering.

"Most people recognise that we need more engineers, and we're failing to attract them into our universities in sufficient numbers," says project leader David Sheppard, a retired entrepreneur who studied geology at university. "Perhaps teaching engineering in a wholly different way may break down the barriers."

Kel Fidler, former vice-chancellor of Northumbria University and a member of the Royal Academy of Engineering's education and training committee, is acting as an adviser to the project. "I believe the way that engineering is taught in UK universities is probably getting past its sell by date," he says. "We don't make enough of creativity or innovation in our engineering courses, and the thing that links the two is design."

While most engineering courses require maths and physics A-levels, the NMITE will admit students with any good A-levels, provided they have "grit, passion and curiosity", Sheppard says. The group also plans to consider apprentices and servicemen for the three-year MEng degree.

The courses will teach topics relevant to Herefordshire, including advanced manufacturing, data security, agri-tech, and renewable energy. The group also thinks these will appeal to policymakers.

"From a government standpoint I think it's fair to say that this ticks a lot of boxes," says Jesse Norman, Conservative MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, who has lobbied heavily for the group in parliament. "There's a feeling that large chunks of the country have missed out on economic development and that it needs to be rebalanced," he adds. "That's something the government has committed itself to."

The first task, though, is to "pin down the money", Norman says. In addition to the government funding, the group will seek £18.25m in match-funding from businesses and plans to take out a £10.5m loan to set the project up for the next five years.

Meanwhile, the NMITE has already recruited a founding president—they're not allowed to call him a vice-chancellor, says Sheppard—with an academic background, although they can't yet name him, and is in talks with the Dyson Foundation and Qinetiq for help designing the syllabus.

If the group is successful in obtaining university status it will be the UK's first new public university in more than 30 years. But Sheppard says the NMITE will become an institute before progressing to university status, and the University of Warwick is expected to act as the degree-awarding body until that time.

However, Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, who is supportive of the initiative, says that making the project a reality "may be harder than a lot of people realise".

Although the green paper on higher education sets out reforms that are likely to make it easier for institutions to gain degree-awarding status, the institution won't yet be able to charge the planned fees of £13,500 a year for the 46-week course, he says. In addition, it won't be able to recruit international students initially, nor will its students have full access to government support. This, says Hillman, means that the first students through the door will have to have deep pockets.

Nonetheless, Norman remains positive. "My hope is that this becomes one of the finest institutions of its kind in the world," he says. "I would like to die with people saying I went to this university in the same way that they would talk about Caltech or MIT."

Image: Archtype, Hereford

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