

Power to the people

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Cumbria is at the start of an exciting future, with ENERGUS, the new £20m 'energy academy', at the heart of it. Alison Turnbull speaks to chief executive Andrew King about its potential in retaining and attracting skilled youngsters.

Photography by Craig Easton/Driftwood

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When Ed Miliband, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, opened the £20 million ENERGUS building near Workington in June, he called it "a positive symbol of West Cumbria's future".

For the 200 students and apprentices enrolled from September 2009, ENERGUS is already playing a large role in their future, developing their skills for the energy sector in general and the nuclear industry in particular.

ENERGUS is at the heart of Britain's Energy Coast initiative of regeneration projects in West Cumbria. These projects include possible nuclear new build, research and training facilities, as well as improvements to local health, transport, culture and leisure facilities – but the key is the creation of a skilled workforce for the energy sector, which is where ENERGUS comes in.

"West Cumbria and the Energy Coast is a national asset with a vital role to play in the energy industry," says Andrew King, chief executive of ENERGUS. "In nuclear, we need to complement decommissioning with new build and deep waste repository systems. In Cumbria we also have unique assets in terms of wind and water. People will come here and gain exposure to these new industries, be trained by good universities and learn practical skills that are not available at this high level anywhere else in the UK."

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Andrew King, chief executive, ENERGUS

The aim is for Cumbria to both attract and then retain more skilled young people, which is the reason why the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) contributed £5 million of the £20 million investment in the project.

"ENERGUS is a piece in a national training puzzle. For Cumbria to grow and develop, it needs to have a net skills gain," says King, "but at the moment the flow of skills is in the other direction. We are developing the facilities here so we can play a full role nationally, as part of the National Skills Academy for Nuclear."

ENERGUS is also working with local educators, schools and careers specialists to engage local children and young adults – and their parents – and stimulate their interest in technology and engineering subjects. As they move up through the system – through apprenticeships, degrees and continuing professional development – these young people will be role models for the next generation.

"Thanks to NWDA support, young people in Cumbria can now train at a leading edge engineering institution without having to leave the county," says King. "We are trying to build up local aspirations for better jobs and a better future."

The National Skills Academy for Nuclear will launch its Nuclear Skills Passport in January 2010. The Skills Passport is a way of recording the nationally recognised standards that people achieve via the academy's network of approved nuclear training facilities across the UK.

Jean Llewellyn, chief executive of the National Skills Academy for Nuclear says: "We're calling ENERGUS a flagship for the National Skills Academy for Nuclear. It makes a statement about the industry – that it's a good place to be."

"We are also launching three modules of basic skills and awareness for incomers to the nuclear industry. Employers need to know that recruits and trainees already have an understanding of the industry and its specific requirements. This was a priority from employers and we've listened to their views."

The nuclear industry is a major driver for the economics of West Cumbria, as is the development of the Energy Coast and the move towards renewables. ENERGUS is also working with Lancaster University to encourage local businesses, engineering or otherwise, to develop their leadership, management and enterprise skills.

"If we can get the right training and approaches into Sellafield – which employs around half of the local workforce – that will feed back into the rest of the workforce in the area," says King.

Nuclear and engineering training provider GEN II – which has been training apprentices in West Cumbria for nearly 10 years – has signed up to deliver its engineering apprenticeships at the ENERGUS Academy. Courses cover a wide range of skills spanning the entire spectrum of electrical and mechanical training, from welders and steel fabricators through to electrical and instrumentation engineers. Mike Smith, managing director of GEN II, says: "We have trained more than 1,000 apprentices since 2000, most of whom have gone in to well-paid jobs. Applications for apprenticeships are up by 15% this year, despite the recession. We even see students aged 14 and under taking a healthy interest in what they could do in the future."

It is not just engineering skills that are needed. ENERGUS is also recruiting and training administrative staff for the future. Five business administration apprentices started working in the academy early in 2009 and were recently joined by a second intake of students. King's enthusiasm for the ENERGUS project is clear: "We created a vision and a strategic direction and we have proved that 'if you build it they will come'. It has been a brave strategy, but the enthusiasm and, dare I say it, energy, that is already associated with ENERGUS gives me great confidence for the future of the academy, for our students' achievements and for the success of the energy sector in years to come."

ENERGUS Key Facts

Enrolled for September 2009:
Apprentices (GEN II): 100
Foundation degree students (University of Cumbria): 70
Teaching staff: 40

Qualifications on offer:
National Skills Academy standard qualifications
Level 2 and 3 NVQs in a wide range of skills, including administration, IT, business and management
Foundation engineering degrees
Undergraduate engineering degrees