

Firms face substantial barriers to university collaboration, despite government initiatives

Businesses are finding it more difficult to collaborate with universities despite a wave of government initiatives designed to increase interaction. This is the conclusion of a new study by the Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM).

Interest in university-industry collaboration has increased in academia and government in recent years. Numerous policy initiatives, including the University Challenge Fund, the Science Enterprise Challenge and the Higher Education Innovation Fund have been designed to increase the value of these interactions.

However the informal relationships between scholars and business people have increasingly come under scrutiny and oversight by university administration. Universities' officials, sometimes Technology Transfer Offices (TTO), are increasingly seeking to capture the value of intellectual property (IP) related to research projects and, according to businesses responding to study, they may have unrealistic expectations about the economic value of the work they are now mediating.

"There is a perception in industry of a rising tide of university red-tape," said Dr Ammon Salter, a co-author of the report from Imperial College Business School, "This is an early warning sign for the UK economy as collaboration between universities and industry is critical for our economic well being. Action needs to be taken to stem this trend before it undoes the good work recent policy has achieved."

Over half of the respondents (55%) blamed administration and regulations, including confidentiality, the ownership and value of IP for limiting their collaboration with universities. Half (49%) felt that universities consistently overvalued IP.

Although only a modest share of UK firms work directly with universities, these interactions have a considerable economic impact. Almost a quarter of firms that took part in the study rely on university research for more than 40% of their innovation projects. Universities are most valuable as a source of ideas and talent rather than a cheap way of outsourcing R & D activities.

"The study shows that UK universities provide a rich pool of talent for firms to draw upon and that interactions between universities and industry are making a critical impact to economic development, which is why the rising level of barriers to these interactions is so troubling," says Dr Pablo D'Este of the Cranfield School of Management, a co-author of the research.

The study highlights other developments that may further contribute to this situation:

- The 2008 Research Assessment Exercise may have made researchers more long-term oriented in their research and therefore less interested in collaboration with industry.
- Universities have created stricter regulations to govern the research conduct of their staff.
- Full Economic Costing in the university sector may have increased the cost to industry of engaging with university partners.

The study argues that if government efforts to promote collaboration are to be successful, they need to reflect the wide variety of collaboration modes between industry and universities. The research offers several routes towards developing more effective policies.

“We need to recognise that the benefits of successful, high-quality university collaboration are broader than IP alone,” said Dr Salter. “Incentives and targets for universities need to encourage a broad range of relationships between business and universities. Focusing on university patenting and licensing income may distract us from other more economically-important forms of interaction.”

Other recommendations include:

- Developing a Research Council-wide system that monitors the number and scale of industry involvement in publicly funded research projects.
- Making greater attempts to track the flows of university-trained talent through the economic system to provide new insights into the nature and scale of contributions of universities to economic wealth.

Commenting on the research, Professor Andy Neely, Deputy Director of AIM Research, says, “This is a key issue for public policy. It may be necessary to develop potential remedies to these problems before they start to undermine the rich and varied set of interactions between industry and universities in the UK.”

-ends-

For more information or to arrange an interview contact:

Colin Hallmark, 3:nine Communications
Tel: 0207 736 1888; 07745 914170; email: colin@3nine.co.uk

Elliott White, Imperial College Business School
Tel: 0207 594 9154 email: e.white@imperial.ac.uk

Caroline Brown, AIM Research Press and Communications Officer
Tel: 020 7862 8515; 0870 734 3000; email: caroline.brown@wbs.ac.uk

Notes for Editors

1. The research was carried out by Johan Bruneel, AIM Scholar, Imperial College Business School, Dr Pablo D'Este, AIM Research Fellow, Cranfield School of Management, Professor Andy Neely, AIM Deputy Director, and Dr Ammon Salter, AIM Fellow and Research Director, UK Innovation Research Centre, Imperial College Business School.

2. The research team was supported by AIM's Innovation and Productivity Grand Challenge, which is funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council, The Innovation and Productivity Grand Challenge is a multi-year programme spread across five UK universities designed to better understand how knowledge translates to value creation.

www.ipgc.ac.uk

3. The research is based on the results of a survey of industrial collaborators on Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) collaborative projects. The survey was undertaken in late 2007 and early 2008 and covers the entire population of businesses that have collaborated on EPSRC collaborative research grants since 1999. The survey builds on a previous survey of EPSRC industrial collaborators, conducted in 2004 by the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex. By combining the two surveys, the study compares changes in the nature and attitude of businesses towards their collaborations with universities from 2004 to 2008. This information is used to help understand the general environment for university-industry collaboration in the UK.

4. AIM is a UK leader in the field of management research. It brings together academics, business, public sector and policy thinkers to develop world class research that has an immediate and significant impact on management practice. It addresses four main themes: Innovation, Services, Management Practices, Productivity and Performance. AIM's research is designed to shed new light on challenges facing the UK and to inform practitioners and public policy debates.

www.aimresearch.org



4th Floor, Stewart House, 32 Russell Square, London WC1B 5DN, UK
Tel: +44 (0)870 734 3000 Fax: +44 (0)870 734 3001 Email: aim@wbs.ac.uk

www.aimresearch.org

