

## **Knowledge exchange: Getting practitioners to engage with universities**

**Tim Hughes, Nicholas O'Regan & Glenn Parry**

**Faculty of Business & Law, University of the West of England**

The challenge is that practitioners and academics are said to have fundamentally different frames of reference (Shrivastava and Mitroff, 1984) and executives do not turn to academics to help them solve their problems, nor do researchers generally turn to practitioners for setting the research agenda (Rynes et al. 2001). And yet there has been little research into the effective practice of academic-practitioner engagement (Rynes 2007; Shapiro et al., 2007; Starkey & Madan, 2001) and the dynamics of university-industry relationships are relatively underexplored (Perkmann and Walsh, 2007)

Following earlier work by two of the authors (Hughes et al. 2011), the opportunity to explore, in more detail, the specific question of how to get practitioners utilising university expertise more extensively was provided by an ESRC funded Business Placement Fellowship entitled "Fast-tracking the competitiveness of firms in the south-west" (Ref: ES/1029877/1). As part of this project, interviews were conducted with fourteen individuals in six major firms located in the South West of England. The firms taking part were identified, in collaboration with the Institute of Directors in the South West, as businesses that have the potential for greater competitive advantage. As such the firms are not considered to be a representative cross-section of firms in the South West, but the interviews do provide rich data from a range of interviewees in different roles, in firms that have potential to benefit from greater access to university expertise. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded to identify key themes, utilising NVIVO software. The consistency of the coding was checked by the team through reviewing all the material coded under each theme.

### **The main findings are outlined below.**

The amount of engagement with universities was generally found to be limited and mainly related to internships/graduate recruitment or, in a few cases, big research projects. In the first place, there is the issue of awareness and accessibility. Universities are not naturally "top of mind" as providers of help to industry and there is little awareness of the range of what they could offer or how to access them. Secondly, there are issues relating to perceptions of the value that academics and university offer to business. Thirdly, those who have worked on grant funded research projects with universities raised many points on the challenges inherent in making these projects work effectively from their point of view.

### *Awareness and accessibility*

Universities are not necessarily even on the list when people in organisations consider their requirements for knowledge related services. This sometimes relates to a lack of awareness of what is available, but also lack of clarity on how to interact with universities to find out what is available. Existing relationships are often maintained between individuals in organisations and individual academics, but not broadened to make the most of the wider expertise available from a university.

The challenge for universities relates to the breadth and complexity of what they do. This is reflected in the difficulties potential users of their services encounter when they use university websites. Interviewees complained that it is very challenging to navigate through to finding information to meet their individual needs. Potential users would like to have a simple way of finding out what is available and who might be the best supplier in the sector. Part of the problem is that universities are often in competition with more focussed suppliers, such as commercial consultants, who specialise in offering very specific services.

### *Value*

Universities and academics are well regarded in many ways. However, it is also recognised that some academics can be difficult to work with. The challenge often arises from differences in perception on priorities and timescales between the two parties. Cultural differences in attitudes to work timescales and delivery were cited by the interviewees as barriers to effective working together.

Universities need to recognise the balance of benefit they receive from cooperation with industry. With the new fee regime and the commercial focus required at UK universities there will be a greater need for universities to demonstrate the value of their courses, particularly in terms of employability.

### *Challenges in making projects work effectively*

The question of ownership of intellectual property (IP) came up again and again in the interviews. Contractual negotiations over IP are often lengthy and cumbersome. The process of research funding is perceived to be over bureaucratic and lengthy and this is not consistent with an entrepreneurial approach, in particular the gap between bidding and project commencement.

At the same time some recognise that those in industry wanting to get the most out of working with universities may need to adjust their approach.

### **Implications**

Our research so far suggests a number of actions that need to be taken to improve the quantity and quality of engagement. Table 1 summarises the issues and suggests areas for change.

Table 1 Issues and possible actions to enhance academic-business engagement

Issue	Possible actions
Awareness and accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearer positioning of universities’ offering and expertise</li> <li>• More effective marketing and communication by university sector to potential users of knowledge</li> <li>• Focus on initial accessibility through the internet</li> </ul>
Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition of academics from traditional mould to Mode 2 working</li> <li>• Development of university systems of reward and training to encourage and support more effective engagement</li> <li>• Review of IP policies to ensure mutual benefit</li> </ul>
Challenges in making projects work effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplification and speeding up of application processes</li> <li>• Communication to businesses of requirements</li> </ul>

The next step is to consider how to take these findings forward. The objective is to develop and test ways in which businesses schools can more effectively provide support to industry in the South West of England.

(Abstract 936 words)

### References

Hughes, T. Bence, D. Grisoni, L. O’Regan, N. and Wornham, D. (2011) “Scholarship That Matters: Academic/Practitioner Engagement in Business & Management” *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Vol 10 No1, pp. 40-57.

Perkmann, M. and Walsh, K. (2007) University-industry relationships and open innovation: Towards a research agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol 9, No 4, pp. 259-280.

Shapiro, D. L. Kirkman, B. L. and Courtney, H.G. (2007) Perceived Causes And Solutions Of The Translation Problem In Management Research, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol 50 No 2, pp. 249-266.

Shrivastava, P. and Mitroff, I.I. (1984) Enhancing Organizational Research Utilization: The Role of Decision Makers’ Assumptions. *Academy of Management Review*, Vol 9, No 1, pp. 18-26

Starkey, K. and Madan, P. (2001) Bridging the Relevance Gap: Aligning Stakeholders in the Future of Management Research. *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 12, Special Issue, pp. 3-26.

Rynes, S. L. Bartunek, J. M. and Daft, R. L. (2001) Across The Great Divide: Knowledge Creation And Transfer Between Practitioners And Academics. *Academy of Management Journal*. Vol 44 No 2, pp.340-355.

Rynes, S.L. (2007) Editor's Afterword. Let's Create A Tipping Point: What Academics And Practitioners Can Do, Alone and Together, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol 50 No 5, pp. 1046-1054.