

Academic engagement with SMEs: Challenges for Fusion

Lynne Hall,

University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK

lynne.hall@sunderland.ac.uk

There is a recognised need to nurture and develop a fusion of disciplines and sectors to stimulate and sustain innovation in the Creative Industries. Whilst fusion across disciplines has been well nurtured, achieving this cross-sector, between the SME and University sectors needs attention.

University senior management are positive about SME collaboration with significant investment in primarily non-academic staff to support it. Meanwhile, most academics place low priority on SME engagement. Instead, their focus is research, teaching and administration.

Although UKRI may assume that projects will lead to collaborations between academics and SMEs, this is not necessarily the case. Instead, cross-sectoral projects primarily involve dedicated research staff supported by University outward facing services, and at a slightly distant level, research academics aiming to understand and interpret the project's impact or its contribution to their research.

To develop fusion between University and Industry requires more than Universities becoming UKRI's channel for providing innovation funds to SMEs. It requires active academic engagement, rather than the current University approach of defraying SME collaboration to dedicated project or business staff.

In Fuse, tempters and sweeteners such as internships, access to funding, courses and networking have unsurprisingly attracted many SMEs, with an ongoing goal to reach out. However, whilst demand has been established, academic supply is more challenging with little motivation except that one should do it.

Until SME engagement has demonstrable value for academics within their quotidian activity, fusion and the potential for cross-sector fusion is challenged. In creating an environment to promote fusion, we must not only consider SMEs and research intensive innovation, but also the motivation for academics and students. Thus, in addition to SME targets and research 'dissemination, communication, exploitation' outputs, we also need to determine the impact on our students, teaching and curriculum, providing demonstrable evidence of the benefits of fusion.