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Exploring the role of conferences in industry-academia collaborations

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ABSTRACT

Industry-academia collaborations have been acknowledged as a crucial mechanism for innovation in the knowledge-based economy (Australia Government 2015; OECD 2016, 2017). However, based on statistics from UNESCO in 2015, the tie between industry and academia is still relatively weak globally. For example, only 1.4% of manufacturing firms in Australia have a partnership with universities (UNESCO 2015). Governments are concerned to encourage links between industry and academia, and measures to encourage these links are central to innovation agendas at state and national levels in Australia and globally (Australia Government 2015; OECD 2016).

Conferences are highly valued by many researchers and practitioners for offering face-to-face communication opportunities (Deery & Jago 2010; du Cros et al. 2017; Edwards, Foley & Hergesell 2016; Edwards, Foley & Malone 2017; Edwards, Foley & Schlenker 2011a; Foley et al. 2010; Foley et al. 2013; Talwar et al. 2012). Research indicates that the informal communication channels established at conferences may provide opportunities for the establishment of more formal collaborations between researchers and practitioners (Ankrah & Omar 2015; Bruneel, d'Este & Salter 2010; Edwards, Foley & Malone 2017; Foley et al. 2010; Foley et al. 2013; Perkmann et al. 2013). However, limited academic attention has been paid to understand how conferences influence the establishment and maintenance of collaborative relationships (Agrawal 2001; Bruneel, d'Este & Salter 2010; du Cros et al. 2017; Foley, Edwards & Schlenker 2014).

Researchers have begun exploring the value of business events for thriving knowledge-based economies, such as their ability to generate new knowledge, facilitate collaboration and develop capability (Business Events Council of Australia 2015; Deery & Jago 2010; du Cros et al. 2017; Edwards, Foley & Hergesell 2016; Edwards, Foley & Malone 2017; Edwards, Foley & Schlenker 2011a, 2011b; Foley et al. 2010; Foley et al. 2013; Wrathall 2011). However, there is a gap in the literature in the area of conferences as facilitators of industry-academia collaboration. Researchers and practitioners are considered crucial actors in the future value chain of business events (Deery 2013; du Cros et al. 2017; Friedman 2016; Talwar et al. 2012). However, extant academic literature mainly focuses on firm-to-firm interactions under the context of business events (Bathelt & Gibson 2015; Bathelt & Schuldt 2008; Borghini, Golfetto & Rinallo 2006; Ling-yee 2006; Rinallo, Borghini & Golfetto 2010; Sarmiento, Farhangmehr & Simões 2015; Zhong & Luo 2018), and offers very little detail when it comes to researcher-practitioner interactions. It is hard to facilitate their interactions at conferences without knowing the current state and characteristics of their interactions. As such, based on the interaction-relationship model (Cunningham 1980; Schurr, Hedaa & Geersbro 2008) and relationship learning theory (Selnes & Sallis 2003), this study aims to explore interactions

between researchers and practitioners at conferences and how their interactions at conferences influence their formal collaborations.

This research will apply qualitative methodology. It is because this study is exploratory in nature to characterize researchers-practitioners interactions, and industry-academia collaboration is a relatively complex phenomenon, which requires more details to understand (Creswell 2009; Elliott & Timulak 2005). Purposeful sampling is applied and the targeted participants will be both researchers and practitioners having experiences in attending conferences with industry-academia engagement. This research will focus on researchers from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths), Medical and Management disciplines, to elicit data across a cross-section of academic disciplines. Semi-structured interviews will be applied to collect data and thematic data analysis approach will be used.

The study will contribute to a theoretical extension of interaction theory and relationship learning theory, and it will offer a better understanding of conferences and collaboration motivations, barriers and enablers for academia, industry and conference organizers. Practically, this research will have policy implications for government innovation agenda.

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