

Establishing SME–university collaboration through innovation support programmes

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collaboration

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Abstract

Purpose – The research purpose is to analyse when and how innovation support programmes (ISPs) can affect collaboration between universities and established small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The paper specifically considers SME's absorptive capacity.

Design/methodology/approach – A Swedish research centre is studied in the context of innovation support and two of its SME-ISPs are examined with regards to industry–university collaboration and impact on firm innovation capabilities. Data collection and analysis are performed, using interviews, survey answers, document search and reflectional analysis to evaluate processes and effects of the centre and the programmes.

Findings – A developed research centre, integrated into both academia and industry, can support translational collaboration and promote SME innovation absorptive capacity. The action learning elements and the organisational development approaches used when coaching in the ISPs contribute to the SMEs internal absorption capacity and collaborational skills. Organising collaboration into ISPs can provide a relational path to future collaboration with universities, which, for example start with student projects.

Research limitations/implications – The study, though limited to one Swedish region, adds to empirical innovation research as it connects industry–university collaboration and absorptive capacity to organisational learning.

Practical implications – The empirical results indicate possible long-term gains for industry and universities in building collaborative innovation into SME-ISPs.

Originality/value – The contribution of this study pertains to the practice of innovation support for established SMEs with the inclusion of absorption capacity and collaborative innovation development.

Keywords Innovation, SMEs, Industry–university collaboration, Organisational development, Production system management development

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Introduction

The mission of universities are to conduct academic research and to spread knowledge through education. Industrial firms benefit from this by recruiting educated staff and appropriating new knowledge by, for example reading scientific journals. Nowadays,

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in the programmes contributed to innovation absorption capacity and collaboration capabilities of SMEs. For collaborative innovation with university to occur it needs to be integrated into, and promoted by, the ISPs. ISPs can then provide a relational path to the university where collaboration develops over time, becoming increasingly intricate and complex. Collaboration may start with SMEs participating in an ISP where they are introduced to working with students and education. Over time they take part in research projects and R&D agendas, co-production grows and becomes beneficial to both parties and to a wider part of society. However, many SMEs may need to mature into this advanced form of collaboration and increasingly build up their realised absorption capacity skills. The full effects of innovation and collaborative R&D requires realised absorption capacity to be developed inside firms before the benefits of collaboration research can be reaped. When this happens, SMEs may sooner realise their upcoming research and development challenges. This study shows that it is worthwhile for SMEs, as well as for the university, to put greater emphasis on industry–university collaboration when designing and running ISPs.

This study contributes with empirical research on SME industry–university collaboration generated by a research centre which runs ISPs. It showed that ISPs promotes innovation, collaboration and absorptive capacity through their coaching elements. Further research is needed into the performance of companies attending ISPs in relation to how the ISPs are managed and what type of organisation provides them. In addition, evaluation of the elements of absorptive capacity and the collaboration development of the ISPs is suggested.

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