

The right academic partner can help smaller enterprises bring innovation to market

The UK is a world leader in research, home to a plethora of internationally acclaimed companies, and has contributed life-changing technologies and products to the global market. However, a historic lack of collaboration and understanding between centres of research excellence and business has seen the UK fail to bring to market some innovations with the potential for explosive growth.

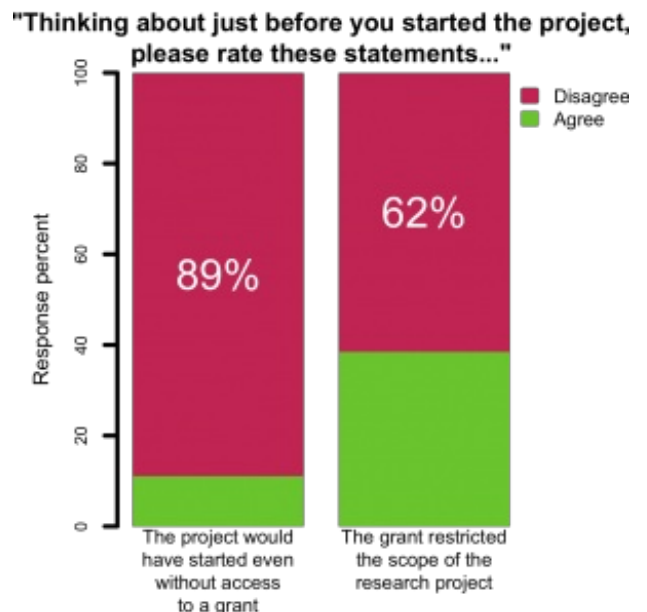


We wanted to understand more about what makes academic and industry partnerships work from the perspective of the micro and small and middle enterprises (SME) involved, which led us to [investigate the subject](#). We surveyed businesses that have participated in a research project funded by Innovate UK in collaboration with an academic institution.

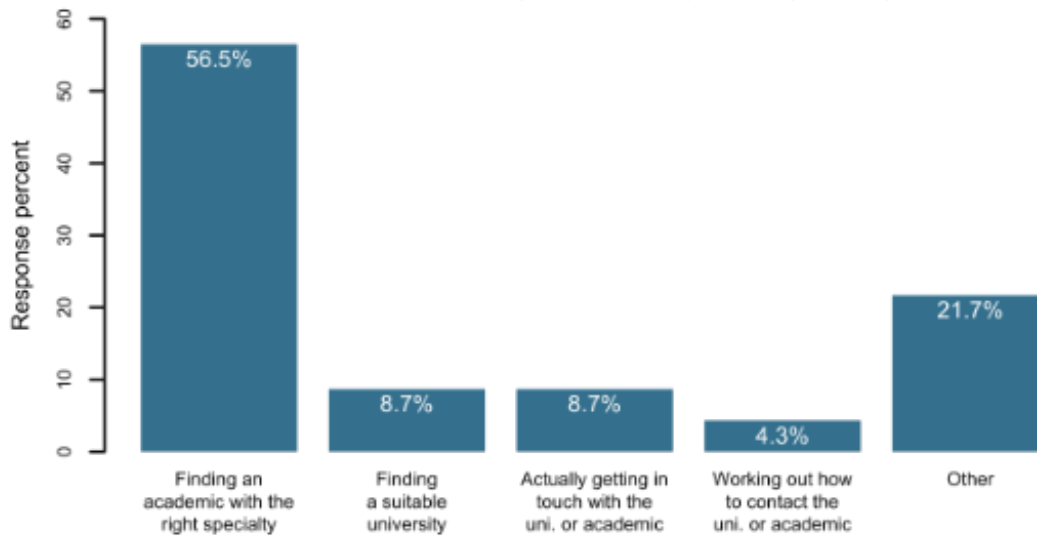
Below, I'll outline four key findings and our recommendations for businesses, universities and policymakers.

1. **Grant funding is integral to collaborative projects**: When we asked businesses about the impact of grant funding on their collaborative project the response was clear: 89% of businesses said the project would not have started if they had not had access to the grant. What's more, only 38% felt that the terms of the grant funding restricted the scope of the project. We feel that this is clear evidence against some of the more vociferous critics of grant funding: without it, most projects would not happen, and the presence of a grant does not significantly limit the outcome.

2. **The biggest barrier to starting a project was finding the right academic partner**: It was clear that businesses found the initial stage of building partnerships with universities difficult. The biggest challenge by far was finding an academic with the appropriate expertise. However, the survey results also suggested that businesses could be making it difficult for themselves by not being proactive enough. 75% of respondents approached just a single university, and only 13% approached three or more. Perhaps a simple case of 'you don't look – you can't find' is applicable here. Whatever the underlying reasoning, it is clear that more needs to be done to help bring together businesses and academics working in the same fields.



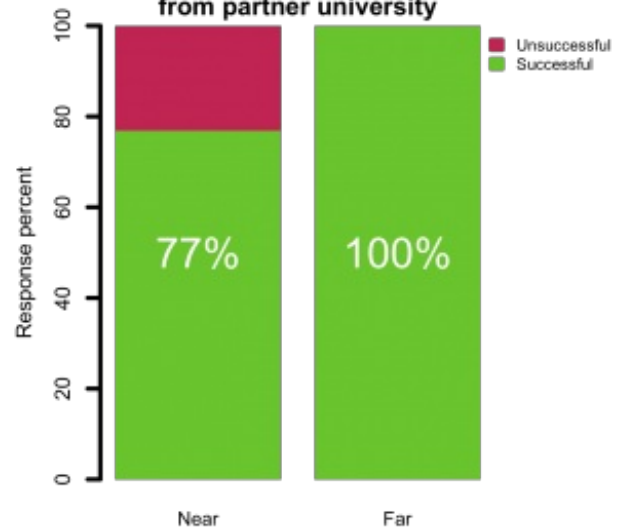
"What were the main challenges in initially finding the right partner?"



3. **Geographical proximity does not necessarily spell a successful relationship:** Interestingly, the only unsuccessful projects occurred when the university and business were located geographically close to each other. Our interpretation is that many local partnerships may be born from convenience rather than strong desire to undertake a project together. Both universities and businesses engaged in such partnerships should be careful about their 'fit' when discussing potential projects. And, perhaps most importantly, both should also not be averse to long-distance partnerships as there is no evidence to suggest that distance impedes success.

4. **The vast majority of partnerships are successful:** 96% of the businesses we surveyed would consider a further collaborative project with a university; indeed 74% were already planning their next project. This suggests that universities looking to initiate further collaborative projects could do a lot worse than look at the pool of previous business participants in their specialist – but not necessarily geographic – area. 89% of participants deemed the project an overall success, a fantastic finding that suggests that overall the 'system' is working well for those who do get a project started.

Project success for businesses by distance from partner university



What does this mean?

There is plenty to be optimistic about in these results. Bringing together academics and businesses can be a complex and delicate process, but our survey suggests that for those who do make it work, the process and outcomes are broadly very favourable. Still, there is certainly room for improvement.

We make the following recommendations:

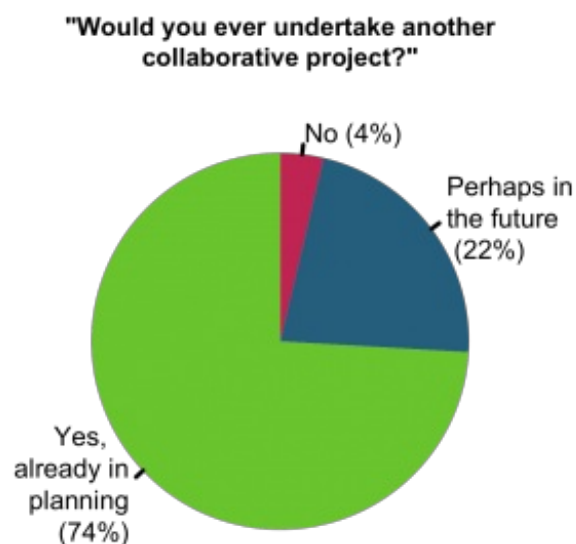
- Policymakers should implement programme changes or a new programme to make follow-on funding more visible for projects that did not produce a commercially viable result at the end of the initial project.
- Universities and businesses should be wary about partnering based on proximity as opposed to suitability. Nearby partners are not necessarily the best partners.

- Universities should be more proactive with reaching out to businesses whose technology bases and values align with those of their research capabilities. A good place to start would be the almost 5,000 businesses who have previously participated in a project as the data suggests almost all are open to further partnerships.
- Universities should work to instill more commercial knowledge in their academics.
- Businesses should more proactively shop around for the most suitable university and academic to partner with. Be wary of those on your doorstep – convenience is not a substitute for knowledge and skill.

It has been extremely encouraging to see how favourably most businesses look upon these collaborative projects. We hope that these findings provide a strong starting point for further discussion and, most importantly, action from all who stand to benefit.

See also [The top ten ways in which firms and universities interact.](#)

*Notes: All graphs were provided by [Beahurst](#). Featured Image Credit: [Michael Coghlan CC-BY-SA-2.0](#)
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Ben McLeod Upon deciding to do something a bit different after his degree Ben joined [Beahurst](#), which provides deep data on innovative growing companies and the funders who back them. Over five years he has worked extensively with universities and has strived to build their ability to move ideas from the drawing board to society. He has a deep understanding of raising equity capital and how the investment landscape is changing. Ben read Natural Sciences at the University of Cambridge and completed a Masters focusing on synthetic chemistry.



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