

Academic-business relationships built on quality research and strong relationships can boast illustrated impact and great results for both sides

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/06/17/academic-business-relationships-built-on-quality-research-and-strong-relationships-can-boast-illustrated-impact-and-great-results-for-both-sides/

6/17/2011

*Academic-business partnerships hold great potential for all those involved but need to be based on quality research and collaboration, strong relationships and the promise of a resulting market differentiation for both the business and academic institution in order for the partnership to truly prosper, writes **James Johns** of HP.*



Academics are finding themselves in an increasingly competitive and commercial world and the Research Excellence Framework will now play a part in establishing a measure of how work conducted in universities is making an impact of the dynamic world of business. Earlier this week at the [Investigating Academic Impact conference](#), I told an audience of academics how powerful and how much potential a relationship with academia can be for a company such as Hewlett-Packard, why HP might enter into an academic partnership in the first place and some of the ingredients that businesses should consider vital to a successful partnership.

HP is the world's largest technology company and invests more than \$3.5bn a year in research and development through a network of five global laboratories, known as [HP Labs](#), including one in Bristol. We currently have different partnerships in place with around 20 UK universities, supporting both the work of our labs and the work we do for clients. In our experience there are three main reasons why HP might enter into an academic partnership.



Former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, hosts a class at the Mile End Group at Queen Mary, University of London, History Department.

Firstly, to enhance capability: The nature and depth of expertise found in universities would, in many cases, be impossible for us to replicate in-house. In addition, through our partnerships with universities we can encourage what undergraduates are taught so that the graduates we recruit have the skills we need for them to transfer seamlessly from their university to our business floor. Such an example of this is our [partnership with the University of the West of England](#), with whom we are shortly to launch a course in Enterprise Computing. Students on this course will benefit from access to internships with HP and will also gain professional qualifications alongside their academic degree.

Second, we look to academic partnerships to enable collaboration. They can help provide valuable peer groups for our own researchers and in-house subject matter experts and this allow us to work as part of the wider research community.

Finally, we look to these relationships to add credibility. We often use research to support our work with customers and to influence the markets for the products and services we sell. It's vital that the research we use is known to be independent if its use is to be effective. This sort of partnership is illustrated well by our work with the School of Management at Cranfield University, where we have funded the creation of an [International Centre for Programme](#)

Management.

As one might imagine, many of the partnerships which support the work of HP Labs are with departments focussed on the STEM subjects. However, our work with government has shown us that partnerships with social sciences departments can also be of great value. The [Innovation Research Partnership](#) we established with the LSE in 2005 is a great example of this. This partnership supported research activity centred on four themes including Public Policy and Technology & Productivity, and resulted in some very useful papers on the way in which public sector organisations use IT as well as the wider impact of IT on firm-level and country-level productivity.

In addition, our relationship with the [Mile End Group](#) in the History Department at Queen Mary is an example of our work with humanities departments. This group specialises in the study of contemporary political history, and includes a course on the Blair Government as part of its curriculum. This partnership provides bursaries for MA students, funds one academic position and supports a high-profile political seminar programme which has included speakers such as Peter Mandelson, Shirley Williams and Denis Healey. This sponsorship in particular has attracted lots of very positive news coverage both for Queen Mary and HP, such as pieces in the [Guardian](#) newspaper and on the [BBC](#) news website. We believe that our current partnership with Queen Mary is a unique example of a technology company sponsoring the work of a humanities department.

So what makes a good academic-business partnership? For us as a business, it comes down to four characteristics. Firstly, it must be based on quality research and teaching. We are a world-class company, and as such, we want our academic partnerships to be with world-class institutions. Second, the best partnerships grow bottom up, based on strong personal relationships. Our experience is that top-down relationships are sometimes established for presentational reasons, rather than because of the real value that might be delivered by the collaboration, and stand to wither quickly as a result. Third, a good partnership should allow both partners to achieve some form of market differentiation. Universities are finding themselves in an increasingly competitive world (and one that is perpetually competitive and commercial) and this factor has become just as important for our academic partners as it is for us as a business.

Finally, we are convinced that our strongest partnerships are those that embrace academic independence, even where this leads to research findings that could be regarded as 'inconvenient' to the business. I have met those in the academic community who believe that commercial sponsorship always comes at an unacceptable price yet I think this can be a misguided view. A partnership which tried to compromise academic independence for the short-term advantage of either party would be in no-one's long-term interest, and would damage the reputation of both partners. For all the reasons mentioned above, academic independence is absolutely key to ensuring that relationships are of great value to a commercial organisation.

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