

Co-leadership crucial to collaborations

Universities must be more aware of how their business partners make use of research, a report by the Council for Industry and Higher Education says.

Instead of the usual system in which universities lead a project and businesses make use of the results, both partners must develop a culture of co-leadership in research, the report states.

“Our findings debunk the impression that universities are the drivers of innovation,” says Keith Herrman, the deputy chief executive of the CIHE and author of the report. “Universities have a distinctive contribution to make in supporting company innovation processes. Companies value the fact that they bring in new ideas. Therefore co-leading should be the new way of thinking about university-business collaboration.”

The report, published on 20 May, says that while businesses have to solve problems here and now, universities can provide a longer time-frame for research, which is a great benefit for companies.

With universities facing extensive funding cuts, collaboration with business partners could soon become a lifeline, the report states, and it is therefore crucial that

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universities prepare themselves to meet the needs of businesses.

“Indeed, many large companies are looking to out-source their R&D capabilities to universities, through an open innovation relationship,” says Ceri Jones, the deputy head of the research and innovation department at Swansea University. “Such collaborations simply could not work without the university partner being fully aware of the research absorption point of the company.”

Apart from the long-term perspective, businesses value the specialisation, techniques and networks universities can bring to a collaboration, according to the report. However, universities should understand that companies cannot measure research impact as accurately as they can. Business research is more diverse and easily influenced by the market, making it difficult to distinguish the impact of single projects, the report says.

The report is the result of a series of projects and workshops carried out by the CIHE in the UK, the United States, Canada and Japan.