

What makes successful research partnerships?

While many universities, government bodies and private sector companies focus on how to build successful research partnerships, University of Sydney's *Australian Centre for Innovation (ACIIC)* has taken on the unique role of facilitating collaboration between knowledge users and producers.

ACIIC is an independent, non-profit company located at the University of Sydney. It has an MOU with the university that all research is conducted at the Centre, with a focus on translating this knowledge into advice for researchers and teaching.

Professor Ron Johnston, Executive Director at the ACIIC, is analysing the factors of success in a number of major spinoff companies in Australia. The emphasis is not on what all the barriers to collaboration are, but how these companies managed to use collaboration to pursue business success.

"We will analyse 10 or 15 of these companies to identify what key characteristics have enabled them to be very effective in collaboration and operate as companies; from which we'll then draw out policy-related insights," Ron says.

The aim is to collate and expose empirical data starting at the corporate end of the spectrum, and examine what systems worked so effectively. Key criteria include:

- How they commercialised their research & development;
- How they established effective collaboration with researchers;
- How they raised funds to invest in their research; and
- How they grew their market.

These four factors will pave the way for informed, policy-related insights down the track. Only recently, The Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) [reported](#) that innovation in Australia struggles from limited direction and short-term thinking.

Ron is quick to note that there is a big gap between the research community and business underpinning the struggle.

"In my mind, there are two embattled and non-comprehending camps, speaking different languages and almost no capability to understand each other. It's almost a metaphorical situation of business versus research, and that's a big impedance to creating successful collaboration and sustainable partnerships," he remarks.

According to Ron, some companies see universities and research organisations as unworldly, out of touch with business reality, unwilling to understand commercial pressures, or they expect too great a return from their specialist knowledge.

“While from the research community’s perspective,” he notes, “researchers see companies as excessively focused on the short-term, unwilling to shift their focus from current problems to future opportunities, limited in their understanding of technical language and difficult to negotiate with for a fair price.”

But at the same time, he acknowledges there are many exceptions. For example, when major companies make significant investments into innovation and research, or smaller businesses are exploring technology-based opportunities. Additionally, when newer industry sectors rely on close interaction with research – such as biomedical engineering.

“The challenge is to transform the exceptions into the norm,” Ron adds.

He outlines a series of key actions that need to be taken on that premise:

- Stronger recognition of and support for the crucial role that science and technology play in a modern diversified economy;
- Ensure that the Industry Growth Centre program identifies greater industry-research collaboration as a key objective;
- Incentives for companies to collaborate with researchers, whether through adjustments to the R&D tax incentive or direct support measures that operate successfully in many countries;
- Moderation of the perverse effects of the ERA in devaluing industry engagement through the adoption of complementary metrics such as the REA proposed by ATSE;
- Facilitate the CRCs playing a stronger outreach role to industry, particularly SMES; and
- Enhance and broaden the skills of the next generations of STEM graduates to ensure they are more industry ready and focused on innovation.

In a bid to collect important qualitative data, Ron frequently speaks to researchers and companies in several major fields, including robotics, energy grids and medical devices – essentially playing an intermediary role between both communities, to a certain extent.

Once all of this information is collected, he will be able to make important distinctions and connections, particularly the growth of the start-up environment and business companies investing in incubators.

“I want to explore new knowledge areas – incubators often have university students working within them, so that’s one part of the equation. The other part actually looks at the extent to which data science is generating new kinds of business and facilitate greater interaction,” Ron explains.

Focusing on both the needs of researchers and business at the same time is vital to create an appropriate model for collaboration and partnerships. And the focus on data science reflects the shift to quantifying variables in partnerships – be it commercial success or economic impact.

“There is a lot of room to drive collaboration and create successful, long-lasting partnerships. But there are still obstacles that need to be overcome,” Ron observes. “Which is where we’re focused on collecting the right data to inform policy outcomes and facilitate research innovation.

At Research Innovation 2016, Ron Johnston will deliver a presentation on gearing up the Australian research sector for a research renaissance.

[Download the brochure](#) or visit www.researchinnovation.com.au to know more.