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SME – Academia cooperation in research projects in Research for the Benefit of SMEs within FP7 Capacities programme

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Background of the study

Aim of the study

To develop an insight on the SME-academia cooperation in FP7 projects in 'Research for the benefit of SMEs' scheme; to contribute to our understanding of FP7

Focus of the study

- The extent to which universities participate as RTD performers in our projects (currently running in the calls in FP7 (FP7-SME-2007-1, and FP7-SME-2008-1)
- SMEs experiences on their cooperation with universities as RTDs in project consortia

Data Sources: SMEs (coordinators, participants)

Data Collection: Questionnaire (electronic) and telephone interviews (only for pilot)





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Characteristics of SMEs – How they described themselves

- The response rate is 13.5%
- Participants: 70%; Coordinators: 29%
- Technological and R&D capacity: Medium= 46%; High=38%
- Relatively young micro-enterprises with medium-high technological and R&D capacity and whose sectors of business are mostly to the fields of IT and agriculture.
- Relatively experienced in public innovation support procedures (about half of the respondents expressed experience in FP).
- Also, they have prior experience in cooperation with academic institutions in research projects in national and/or EC level programmes.
- About 43% SMEs expect economic return (increase in turnover and access to new markets; and increase in reputation)





Findings and Conclusions

- Key factors in project progress: Good project coordination, available correct competence, resources, and willingness for project participation
- Most of the time, the universities are selected to the consortium based on their technical competence, experience in the field and based on their previous relations with SMEs.
- In research projects, as RTDs, universities and other academic institutions are naturally found to be useful mostly at scientific and technical activities. These are followed by proposal writing stage.
- While it is true that SME participants are active in initiating research project ideas, the RTDs (both research organisations and higher education institutions) take an active role in providing initial idea for research projects.
- Effective communication in consortia between SMEs and academia is highly valued and underlined by the SMEs.
- In majority of the cases, it is thought positively on university involvement in research projects.
- The challenges and problems experienced at the beginning phase (while creating the project) are mostly related to IPR issues.



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- There is an increase in the number of cases reporting problems and challenges during project process. These problems are mainly related to SMEs' needs and priorities being undermined, shortage of staff and expertise, administrative and coordination related problems.
- A great majority of SME respondents (70%) plan to have longer cooperation with the same universities. Almost all the respondent SMEs (96%) are interested in further cooperation with other universities in general. This cooperation being based on: future and further plans dependent and independent to the current project; having continuing access to qualified staff; and enhancing network.
- SME-academia cooperation is seen as beneficial for SMEs since a great majority (around 85%) agrees with this due to: access to knowledge, knowledge transfer, and networking purposes.
- Similarly, most of the respondents (around 85%) believe that SME-academia cooperation is beneficial for academic institutions as well. This is due to the following: access to business and to real world, contribution to personnel development, financial gains to university budget and for networking purposes.
- Advice to SMEs and academic institutions on SME-academia cooperation: Get to know each other; understand SME needs and priorities; ensure SME control over projects; and complete tasks.





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Secrets for a working university-business partnership

- 1) SME needs: universities taking into consideration of SME needs
 - a) Commercialisation: market-oriented research
 - b) SME focus based on real needs of SMEs
 - c) More power to SMEs: More financial support, more power in consortium
- 2) Mutual benefits
 - a) Win-win: make sure that both sides are happy
 - b) Better communication
 - c) Mutual understanding
- 3) Suggestions for actions to take
 - a) Mobility actions for mutual understanding (student/researchers)
 - b) Local cooperation
 - c) Cooperation from the start – from pre-planning stage
 - d) Simplification of procedure for exchange between universities and SMEs
 - e) Better time management on university part
 - f) Reconsideration of funding and financial structure
 - g) More networking and awareness





Recommendations to the EC

- 1) SME focus including consideration of SME commercial benefits
 - a) Consortium selection – know your university: university experience and expertise, time to get to know each other, mediator in the consortium
 - b) SME involvement: More power to SMEs, SME direct financial support
 - c) University personnel: Less administration so that sufficient time is dedicated for projects
- 2) Simplification: administration, financial rules and procedures, reducing paperwork, proposal evaluation
- 3) Finances
 - a) RTD calculations, IP and Payment procedures
 - b) Flexibility for payments and time extensions
- 4) Hands-on control of the EC: better control on the field
Communication and information flow
- 5) Additional recommendations:
 - More network: events by EC
 - Go regional/geographically close
 - Get smaller
 - Better EC electronic portal

Additional Remarks

- Commercialisation: Focus and more fund on putting product into market and more guidance from EC
- Support for demonstration action
- Attention to EC “universities solicit us to help them get funding”
- Cut down on bureaucracy: Coordinator role not practical for SMEs that lack time and staff; reconsider RTD cost; direct financial support for SMEs
- EC should improve its accessibility
- Motivation: Reintroduce exploratory awards of FP5
- Real need and correct timing: be careful while evaluation
- Geographical location matters
- Positive and negative remarks



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**Thank you very much for your
attention**

Feedback and Questions

