
Industry-university collaboration falls short as revenue earner

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While the federal government pushes for greater collaboration between universities and industry to ensure research investment leads to technological advances, the sector has some way to go before these efforts can become a serious income earner.

University revenue associated with industry work and research commercialisation amounted to \$1.3 billion in 2015, less than 5 per cent of the sector's total income that year, the latest snapshot of higher education providers' financial reports shows.

Just over half of these revenues were generated by the Group of Eight universities, which collectively earned \$682 million from consultancies and contracts, royalties, trademarks and licences.

But even within the Go8 universities differed markedly in their ability to turn academic research and expertise into income-earning ventures. The University of Queensland led the pack in 2015 with revenues of \$182m from collaboration and commercialisation activities, accounting for 11 per cent of its total income.

UQ is widely seen as a leader in the field, where its research commercialisation company, UniQuest, has enjoyed many success stories such as with Gardasil, the cervical cancer vaccine, and Vaxxas, a needle-free vaccine delivery.

The University of Sydney earned \$107m or 5 per cent of its income in 2015 from commercialisation activities, followed by Monash University, which recorded revenues of \$89m (5 per cent of its income).

Several non-Go8 universities surpassed some of their elite counterparts.

Curtin University, which earned \$77m (or 9 per cent of its total income) in 2015, outperformed the University of Melbourne, which earned \$72m (3 per cent).

Similarly, the University of Newcastle earned \$65m (9 per cent), putting it slightly ahead of the University of NSW, which recorded revenues of \$64m (4 per cent).

John Howard, an innovation expert and adjunct professor at the University of Technology Sydney business school, said the extent to which universities encouraged their staff to engage in contracts and consultancies, and facilitated such arrangements, varied greatly across the sector.

"We know anecdotally that many full-time academic staff are also involved in running their own businesses, or working with others, in areas like management consultancy," Mr Howard said.

"This can be a positive as practice informs research and teaching — as well as research informing practice. But conflicts of interest must be avoided and arrangements must be open and transparent."

Dr Howard said the extent of industry engagement, as recorded in the financial reports, was probably under-reported as universities also collaborated with industry and the wider community in a variety of pro bono ways.

The National Survey of Research Commercialisation report for 2012-14, the latest available from the Department of Industry, shows the continuing endeavour to monetise research outcomes is yielding mixed returns.

The snapshot found universities held more than three quarters of the 15,463 research contracts, consultancies and collaborations entered into in 2014.

However, both the number of commercialisation staff employed in universities and new start-ups reported, including those by universities, fell that year, the report found.

It also identified a 30 per cent drop in the value of equity related to the licensing and intellectual property held by research organisations in 2014.



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