

New study suggests that academics make poor entrepreneurs

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The research, published in the journal *Industry and Innovation*, calls into question increasing pressure on universities to act as drivers of economic growth, and suggests that policy-makers focus on more vocational FE colleges instead.

The new study, carried out by Dr Ross Brown, found that pressure on universities to act as generators of high-tech start-ups has largely failed.

Dr Brown, a lecturer in the University's School of Management, said: "While very much the received wisdom that universities are good for business and good at creating businesses, unfortunately the reality doesn't quite match these expectations.

"The strongly engrained view of universities as some kind of innovation panacea is deeply flawed. As occurred in the past when inward investment was seen as a "silver bullet" for promoting [economic development](#), university research commercialisation has been granted an equally exaggerated role in political and policy making circles. Universities are not quasi economic development agencies."

While previously perceived as bodies which undertake teaching and 'blue-skies' research, Dr Brown says that universities are now operating in a new environment with a 'third mission' to help promote economic development.

However, his study found that despite considerable expenditure

committed towards research commercialisation in Scotland, the returns have been relatively minor in terms of numbers and growth of university start-ups, and levels of licensing agreements with Scottish SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises).

He explained: "The reason for this lack of success owes to the fact that most academics make poor entrepreneurs and often view public sector funding as quasi form of research grant income. Additionally, despite the high level of focus on stimulating university-industry linkages, most SMEs do not view universities as suitable or appropriate partners when it comes to developing their innovative capabilities. Indeed, in some cases fostering these links can be detrimental to some SMEs.

"Given the nature of the local economy with its very low levels of innovation capacity in SMEs, the remit conferred upon them is a mission impossible for Scottish universities. Part of this owes to the mismatch between the advanced nature of [higher education research](#) and the more routine technical needs of most SMEs."

Dr Brown stresses that his study does not downplay the significant and vital role that universities play in Scotland. He said: "Universities are vital for generating human capital, attracting external research income from UK and EU funding councils and for acting as magnets for top-rated academic researchers. They also play a role in creating the environment conducive to stronger entrepreneurial environments, especially in cities such as Edinburgh and Glasgow.

"Going forward however, policy makers might wish to get other actors especially within the small business community more centrally involved in shaping how best to tackle the deep-seated problem of low levels of corporate R&D in Scotland. Arguably, support organisations such as Scottish Enterprise and Interface should work to connect SMEs to all sources of innovation not just universities. Given their strong vocational

focus, FE colleges may also potentially have a key role to play."

More information: Ross Brown. Mission impossible? Entrepreneurial universities and peripheral regional innovation systems, *Industry and Innovation* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/13662716.2016.1145575](https://doi.org/10.1080/13662716.2016.1145575)

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