

South-East universities turn their knowledge into wealth

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In these tough economic times, universities are under pressure to use their knowledge and discoveries to drive economic growth, but an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) study reveals that not all universities are equal. Universities in the greater south-east of England seem to be better than those in less competitive regions at commercialising their research and innovation.

Universities are stretching out beyond their academic colleagues and supporting businesses to innovate in a number of ways, in launching new products or increasing their operational efficiencies. Universities remain seats of learning, but today they are equally hubs of innovation; the knowledge they generate can fuel market competitiveness and economic growth. But how does knowledge get from the thinkers in their laboratories and libraries into the hard world of business and money-making?

A study led by Professor Robert Huggins from the University of Wales Institute Cardiff, has made a regional comparison of how knowledge flows out of universities and into the business community both in the local area and beyond the region where particular universities are based.

"We found that it really does matter where you are in the country," Professor Huggins remarks. "Universities in more competitive regions, especially the south-east, are generally more productive than those located in less competitive regions. They are more successful at bridging the gap between the knowledge they create and concrete [business applications](#). Universities in less competitive regions tend to underperform in this respect."

Professor Huggins explains that one of the main reasons for this pattern is that universities in the south-east benefit from a high concentration of other Research and Development institutions as

well as innovative firms in the region. Universities in less competitive regions don't have the same density of local research groups in their networks, so there are fewer links, less interaction and less opportunity to collaborate on solving business problems.

Professor Huggins is careful not to place blame at the door of the universities. The study suggests that in less competitive regions, businesses are less likely to seek to engage with universities, and universities are left to take the initiative to spin-out and commercialise their own knowledge assets. The findings show just how important universities are in regional [economic growth](#); their ability to commercialise the knowledge they create is absolutely critical to our competitiveness.

"But uncompetitive regions lack the additional knowledge infrastructure, besides universities, which is more commonly a feature of competitive regions" Professor Huggins is keen to point out. "Universities are just part of the picture; I think the onus placed on them to become the principal bases of tradable [knowledge](#) in many regions is probably too heavy."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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