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Universities and Corporates – a Shared Reputation Opportunity

How to  **turn business partnerships
into powerful reputation
capital and policy influence**

With a foreword by
Prof Mark Jefferies
Head of University
Partnerships and
Policy at Rolls-Royce

RESEARCH INSIGHT ADVISORY

Universities and corporates – a shared reputation opportunity

This paper draws on insights from Echo Research's roundtable with 12 UK university communications leaders and Professor Mark Jefferies, Head of University Partnerships and Policy at Rolls-Royce. Communications experts from leading US institutions also kindly contributed.

About the Authors

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Foreword

Professor Mark Jefferies
Head of University Partnerships & Policy, Rolls-Royce



In today’s knowledge-driven economy, institutional reputation is far more than a matter of prestige – it is a critical asset that enables trust, attracts talent, and sustains long-term partnerships.

This is particularly true for university-industry collaboration, where long-term successful partnerships hinge not only on technical capability, but on the credibility, culture, and consistency of the institutions involved.

As someone who has spent years working at the interface between industry and academia, I have seen time and again that the most transformative collaborations are built not just on shared interests, but on shared values. Trust is the currency. People – their motivations, their networks, their resilience – are the foundation. And long-term ambition, often spanning decades, is the thread that binds partners through cycles of innovation and uncertainty.

We’ve built national scale infrastructure, trained hundreds if not thousands of people, and delivered safe and reliable technology upon which lives depend as a result. It matters, and it can be done.


Successive government reviews, and, increasingly, multiple academic case studies show that sustained collaboration thrives when both sides commit to transparency, flexibility, and mutual learning. These frameworks succeed not because of transactional agreements, but because they cultivate a reputation for delivering impact over time – a reputation that amplifies future opportunities.


Reputation, in this context, is not built overnight. It is the cumulative result of consistent delivery, ethical conduct, and a willingness to co-create solutions that neither partner could achieve alone.

As we navigate increasingly complex global challenges, the importance of institutional trust and long-term commitment between academia and industry will only grow.


This paper offers a timely and thoughtful examination of how reputation intersects with successful collaboration – and why, in the end, it is people and their commitment that carry it forward.

Executive summary

 **The Challenge:** Against a backdrop of the government’s mission to kickstart economic growth, Higher Education adds £265 billion to the UK economy¹. Yet too often the sector’s contribution to a growth-driving industrial strategy is overlooked.

 **The Opportunity:** University-industry partnerships can be a powerful accelerator of value creation. Not only for funding, at a time when two in five universities face deficits, but also as a golden opportunity to show impact and amplify influence.

But many institutions leave this reputational dividend on the table.

 **The Solution:** A strategic communications approach to transform partnerships into reputation-building powerhouses.

The power of partnerships

As the government's new Industrial Strategy seeks to tackle anaemic growth, collaboration between universities and industry has never been more crucial to the UK's economic success.

Lloyds Bank and PwC estimate that for every one pound invested in higher education research, nearly five is generated in annual economic output across the UK economy – £40 billion worth of increased productivity every year.²

At their best, these two sectors – one centred on knowledge, the other on innovation and enterprise – form strategic alliances which amplify their impact and influence.

But too often, the relationship is under-leveraged or misunderstood, especially in the eyes of public policy leaders who shape the economic growth agenda.

"Communication with those who care, those who matter, and those who are in a position to help is essential but often not well understood."

James S. O'Rourke, IV, Teaching Professor Emeritus of Management and Organization, The University of Notre Dame

Universities are too often caricatured as a net drain on national resources – not as a key part of the solution.

This perception limits the ability of the sector to secure its major policy goals; chiefly, sustainable funding (against a backdrop of an alarming number of institutions projected to run deficits in 2025/26) but also access to global talent, involvement in local and sector growth plans and regulatory reform.

The question isn't whether partnerships create value. It's whether that value is being captured and converted into the influence our universities need to thrive.

"It can be challenging for universities and businesses to develop a common approach to engagement with key stakeholders – but when it works, the impact can be significant."

As Vice-Principal (External Relations) at the University of Sydney during the pandemic, I was part of a concerted effort where universities and businesses came together to influence government regulations that were hitting not only higher education but the wider economy. We had to shift the perception that these were 'university issues' and demonstrate their broader economic impact."

Now at King's College London, we have a strong academic reputation with government in particular areas, but we're looking afresh at how we engage with government as a whole institution – demonstrating the full breadth of King's contribution."

Tania Rhodes-Taylor, Executive Director, Communications and External Affairs, King's College London

"Universities don't impact the economy...do they?"

With a wealth of data and many great examples, it should be unarguable that university-industry partnerships have an outsized economic impact.

Total income from these collaborations rose from £900m in 2004 to £1.5bn in 2023³, powering innovations in nanomaterials, hydrogen power, AI and robotics, DNA/RNA sequencing, cell therapies and drug discovery.

This impact aligns well with the 'IS-8' priority sectors the Industrial Strategy aims to turbo-charge, from advanced manufacturing to clean energy and life sciences.

UKRI calculates that Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) generated more than £2bn for the economy between 2010 and 2020. Sheffield Hallam, alone, has delivered over 210 KTP projects with more than 150 companies since 1985.

So, on paper, the goals of policymakers and universities should align. Launching a £54 million Global Talent Fund for HE in July, the government said *"driving new tech innovations and scientific breakthroughs will fire up the UK economy and put rocket boosters on the government's Plan for Change."*

While Universities UK says, *"funding should flow through the Industrial Strategy to incentivise collaboration between businesses and universities"*.

For blue-chip titans like GSK, Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems, university partnerships offer unique access to *"a wealth of talent and creativity to help protect our capability into the future (Rolls-Royce)." More than 80% of research in the latest national assessment was classified as 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent'.*

At the top end of the scale, Rolls-Royce invests tens of millions of pounds annually in collaborative research partnerships with UK and international universities, many spanning several decades, and supports around 500 PhDs alongside engineering apprenticeships, education, training, and the creation of research facilities.

Its network of Research and University Technology Centres works across engineering disciplines from combustion and aerodynamics to materials and manufacturing technology.

Professor Mark Jefferies, Head of University Partnerships and Policy at Rolls-Royce, is an advocate of this collaboration: *"the combination of excellent research, concentrated doctoral training, and strong industrial links continues to result in academic research making a real impact in the UK."*

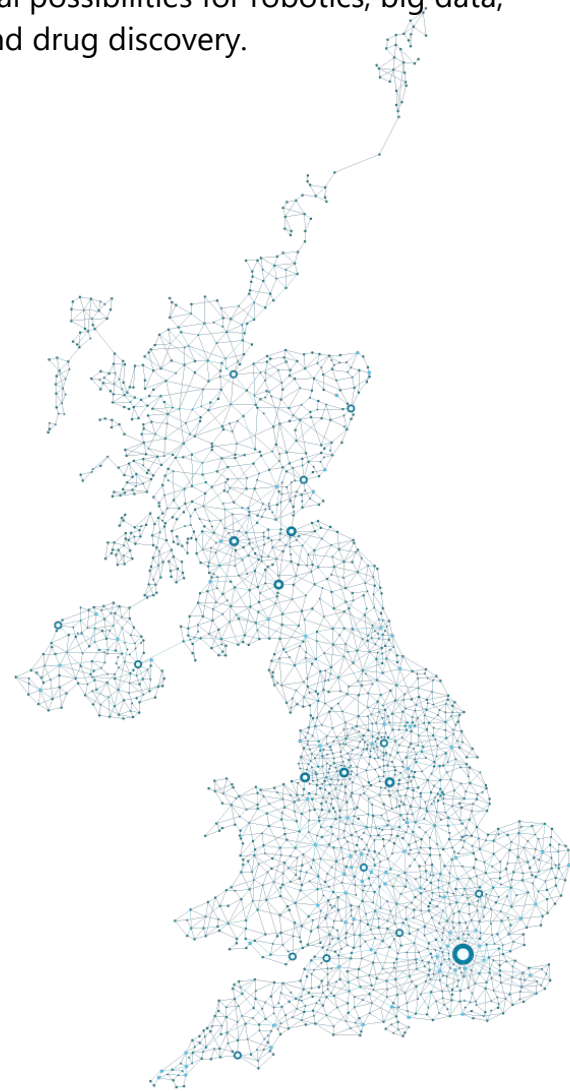
Place-making through partnerships

The regional cost-benefit analysis is equally robust.

Lloyds Bank and PwC state *"long-term partnerships between universities, businesses, and public bodies are essential for driving regional growth and development."*

In the South-West, Exeter University's Green Futures Solutions boasts 5 of the world's top 21 climate scientists, working with businesses like Toyota and South West Water on projects from renewable energy to critical minerals and the circular economy.

Up the M5 in Bristol, the university's partnership with HPE and NVIDIA recently debuted the Isambard-AI supercomputer, able to process in one second what it would take the entire global population 80 years to achieve. This is opening up new commercial possibilities for robotics, big data, climate tech and drug discovery.



Why isn't the message cutting through?

The impact data is compelling, and many communications teams put a lot of effort into promoting partnerships.

So why do many struggle to break through with meaningful coverage that builds institutional reputation?

Information overload

Universities manage relationships with everyone from prospective students to government officials, alumni to local communities. With competing priorities – plus ongoing reputational challenges – partnership stories can get lost.

The timing sweet spot

Finding the right moment to promote the partnership requires strategic planning. Too early and you're stuck with 'grip and grin' photos, with societal benefits still years in the future. Too late, and the news cycle has moved on.

The IP minefield

Intellectual property complexities create messaging paralysis. Legal teams worry about revealing too much, business partners want to protect competitive advantages, and communications teams struggle to craft clear narratives that satisfy everyone while remaining newsworthy.

Competing priorities

Risk-averse communicators hesitate to promote work with sectors that might alienate other stakeholders. Meanwhile, business partners want to align with their own strategic announcements, risking missed opportunities.

Who's our audience?

Business partners often prioritise trade publications and investor-focused outlets that rarely appear on university communications teams' target lists.

This disconnect means partnerships often receive coverage in the wrong places for institutional reputation building.

1

Align with power

Today, every policy option is contested, each pound of spending scrutinized.

Don't fight the tide - ride it.
Map your partnerships against:

- the Industrial Strategy's IS-8 priority sectors
- supporting strategies for city regions and clusters
- regional growth plans
- the 10 Year Health Plan for England

Action Point: Create constituency-level impact reports for local MPs. Show them exactly how your partnerships deliver their agenda.

2

'One-yard line problems': Sometimes just one small push gets you over the goal line. Are you communicating these victories?

Make business your advocate

Third party endorsement dials up credibility and showcases impact.

Collaborate with partners around shared narratives, networks and resources. Corporates stand to gain too – and have lobbying muscle-power.

A proven formula:

- technical staff = Innovation credibility
- senior executives = Economic impact authority
- both together = Powerful narrative

3

Quick wins, long-term relationship

Feed policy makers' appetite for case studies.

Yes, fundamental research can take decades and collaborations mature with time.

But incremental breakthroughs happen monthly. Document them, celebrate them, share them.

4

Data tells, stories sell

Too often, impact is buried in annual reports or websites.

Create a continuous narrative:

- quarterly partnership newsletters
- regular stakeholder events
- digital storytelling campaigns
- media-ready case studies
- KPI dashboards: funding secured, jobs created, patents filed, policy mentions

Socialise these internally to flag commercial opportunities, externally to show impact.

5

Sharpen your focus

Universities often fall into the trap of communicating everything to everyone.

The top 20% of universities generate 80% of total collaboration income. Others need to identify and spotlight their strongest partnership assets.

Avoid broad, unfocused messaging. A mile wide but an inch deep seldom cuts through.

Use business partners for inspiration; they tend to be laser-focused on brand USPs (Unique Selling Points) and most marketable assets.

Ask yourself: What are we genuinely world-class at? What partnerships showcase this best? Lead with those stories.

6

Coordinate, don't confuse

Mixed messages kill momentum

The engineering faculty announces a breakthrough. The business school claims credit for the commercial application. The press office talks about student opportunities.

Result? Stakeholders get confused. Messages get diluted. Opportunities get missed.

The CCO role: map stakeholder needs + ensure message discipline = clarity and impact.

7

Choose partners wisely

Not all commercial partnerships build reputation value – some might destroy it, especially in this polarised political environment.

Do the due diligence to ensure partners are aligned on core values and anticipate stakeholder reactions.

Ask: how will students, faculty, funders or the media react to partnerships with companies in controversial sectors? Do reputation risks outweigh commercial benefits?

8

Strength in numbers

Leverage your collective voice.

Sector-level representatives like Universities UK, Russell Group and the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) can say things individual institutions can't. Use sector-level campaigns to:

- build policy momentum
- spread reputational risks
- amplify individual success stories

9

Activate your secret weapon

45 million UK adults have university qualifications

Your alumni can be powerful advocates and reputation-builders. Harness their goodwill to amplify influence and build policy momentum.

10

Cultivate your most valuable asset

Business partnerships can drive reputation value. But only when that reputation is managed as a strategic asset.

Senior-level support is essential. As are robust reputation metrics - *what doesn't get measured doesn't get managed.*


Both partners can learn a huge amount from each other, sharing reputation frameworks, risk management approaches and communications.

10 Recommendations

To leverage partnerships for reputation capital and policy impact

"Be tangible. Be visible. Be targeted."


4 key steps to maximise the reputation impact of your partnership


- **1 Audit your current approach**
- map existing partnerships against policy priorities
 - identify messaging opportunities
 - assess stakeholder perceptions of current partnerships


"Both universities and corporates can benefit from adopting and sharing best practices in stakeholder engagement. Universities excel in fostering long-term relationships and leveraging their alumni and employers' networks to build industry and community impact, while corporates often prioritize measurable outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction."

Aligning their goals – such as addressing critical societal needs – can strengthen these partnerships. Transparent communication about actions, programs, and outcomes is key to sustaining trust and driving mutual success."

Juan-Carlos Molleda, Ph.D.
Edwin L. Artzt Dean and Professor, School of Journalism and Communication
University of Oregon

- **2 Lay the foundation**
- develop the partnership communication strategy
 - create a stakeholder map and engagement plan
 - establish success metrics and tracking systems

- **3 Curate & narrate**
- implement a coordinated messaging approach
 - enlist business partners as advocates
 - begin regular impact documentation and storytelling

- **4 Scale & succeed**
- demonstrate measurable reputation improvements
 - influence policy discussions in your sector
 - become the go-to example for effective partnership communication

1London Economics report for Universities UK, September 2024
2Lloyds Banking Group and PwC report, December 2024
3National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) April 2025

Find out how Echo can help ensure the value of your partnerships is being captured and converted into the influence you need to thrive.

We offer tailored, budget-friendly research and advice to help you:

- focus on what potential partners value & expect
- leverage your key assets and USPs
- identify new opportunities & manage risks
- map your 'partner market' & influencers
- understand what drives success – and what doesn't
- develop communications & engagement plans
- secure buy-in from internal and external stakeholders

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RESEARCH INSIGHT ADVISORY

Experts in communication, brand and reputation research

For over 30 years, we have delivered research-led, board-ready insights to communications leaders working around the world. Our award-winning, human-led research, analysis and insight gives our clients the confidence to make informed decisions to support communications strategies that protect and build corporate and brand reputation.

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