

The Wilson report on University-Business collaboration is fundamentally flawed. The 2011 white paper (Putting students at the heart of Higher Education, paragraph 13) asked Sir Tim Wilson to undertake a review into how we make the UK the best place in the world for university-industry collaboration. At a recent open meeting of the R&D Society, he stated that he had taken the first part of that white paper paragraph – “we also want universities to look again at how they work with business” as his prime term of reference and therefore offers a series of what appear to be brainstorming ideas/suggestions on what universities could do rather than take a hard look at the outcomes business needs. It is not the role of Universities to spend money on trying to push their research into business. As Alison Richard, former vice-chancellor of the University of Cambridge, was quoted as saying, “As institutions charged with education, research and training, our purpose is not to be construed as that of handmaidens of industry.” Instead, business should be left to pull through the technology needed for successful innovation and leave university resources for real research. What a pity that the Review Panel was made up entirely of academics. And goodness knows how an 88 strong Advisory Board could ever have had a meaningful discussion between themselves.

The report offers up 30 recommendations plus 24 so-called “study recommendations”. Many of the statements in the report seem to be broad statements based on perception not fact, offering little by way of clear policy recommendations. Take a few examples.

Recommendation 27 – “LEPs have the potential to have a significant influence upon economic growth in their localities. Universities are key players in the supply chain for research, innovation and skills; they should be at the heart of an LEP. Government should work with the LEP network to understand local priorities and needs for government funding, including activities supporting generic business–university engagement.” Anyone who has been involved in the setting up the LEPs knows that they have neither the resources or capacity to have any impact on economic growth in the near term. While I was never the greatest fan of RDAs, they had started to demonstrate that they could deliver on exactly this role. It will take years, if ever, for the LEPs to get to that position.

Recommendation 29 - As enterprise zones develop management structures and clarity around their specific offer to inward investors, local universities and UKTI should be strongly engaged to deliver coherent international promotion of each enterprise zone. This seems to recycle the old ideas on clusters. While it is easy to point to the incredible success of Silicon Valley or the Cambridge Phenomenon, as far as I aware there is no academic work which has clearly identified the factors for successfully establishing clusters. Indeed in the BIS economic paper 15 published in December 2011, alongside the Research and Innovation strategy confirms this. Wilson should have been absolutely clear on the success factors for clusters before making such a recommendation.

Then the idea that universities need to collaborate on a referral system (Reflective recommendation 2, paragraph 3.4), seems to fly in the face of collaboration which is happening with researchers as evidenced by research publications. There has been a substantial increase in papers co-authored both nationally and internationally. In my experience, the best academics already collaborate extensively and know where the key work in their field is going on.

So what will happen to this report. In my view we will see ministers thanking Tim Wilson for his work, they will pay lip service to accepting some recommendations (eg University voucher scheme already announced before the report was published) and then it will be quietly shelved. What a wasted opportunity.